MARCH 1999

Asimov's
SCIENCE FICTION

Death from the Sky!
You can run, but you can't hide!

Diana by Starlight
R. Garcia y Robertson

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Rick[illegible]ley

Ste[illegible]r
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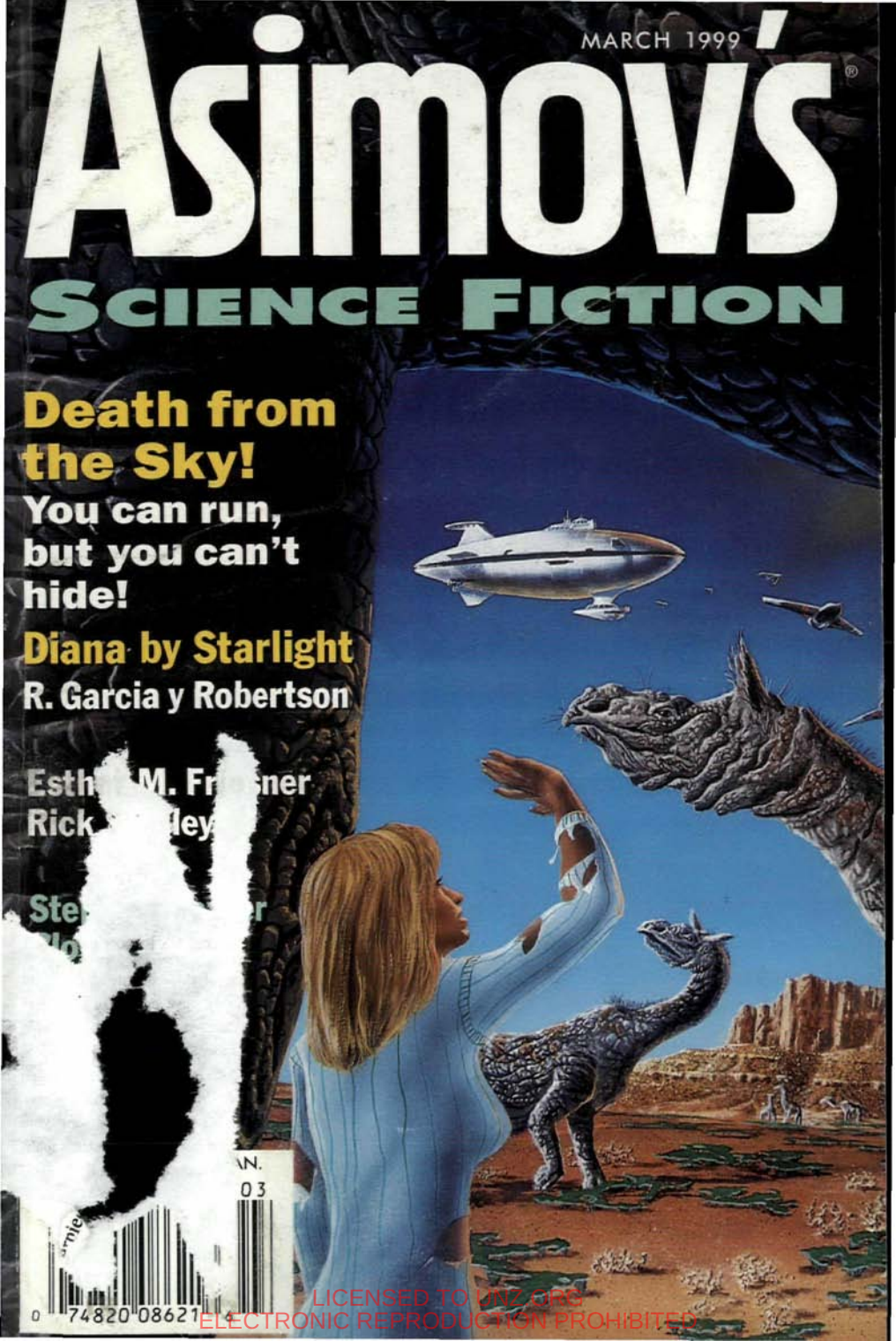

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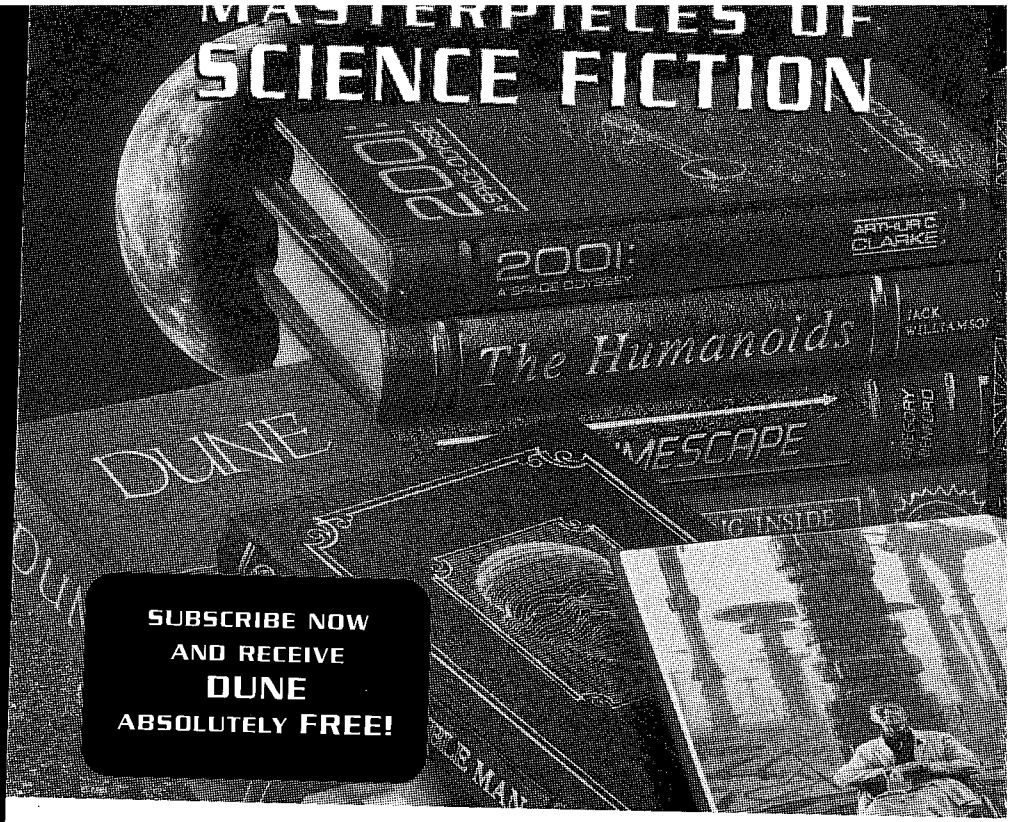

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Stories from Asimov's have won thirty-two Hugos and twenty-four Nebula Awards, and our editors have received thirteen Hugo Awards for Best Editor. Asimov's was also the 1997 recipient of the Locus Award for Best Magazine.

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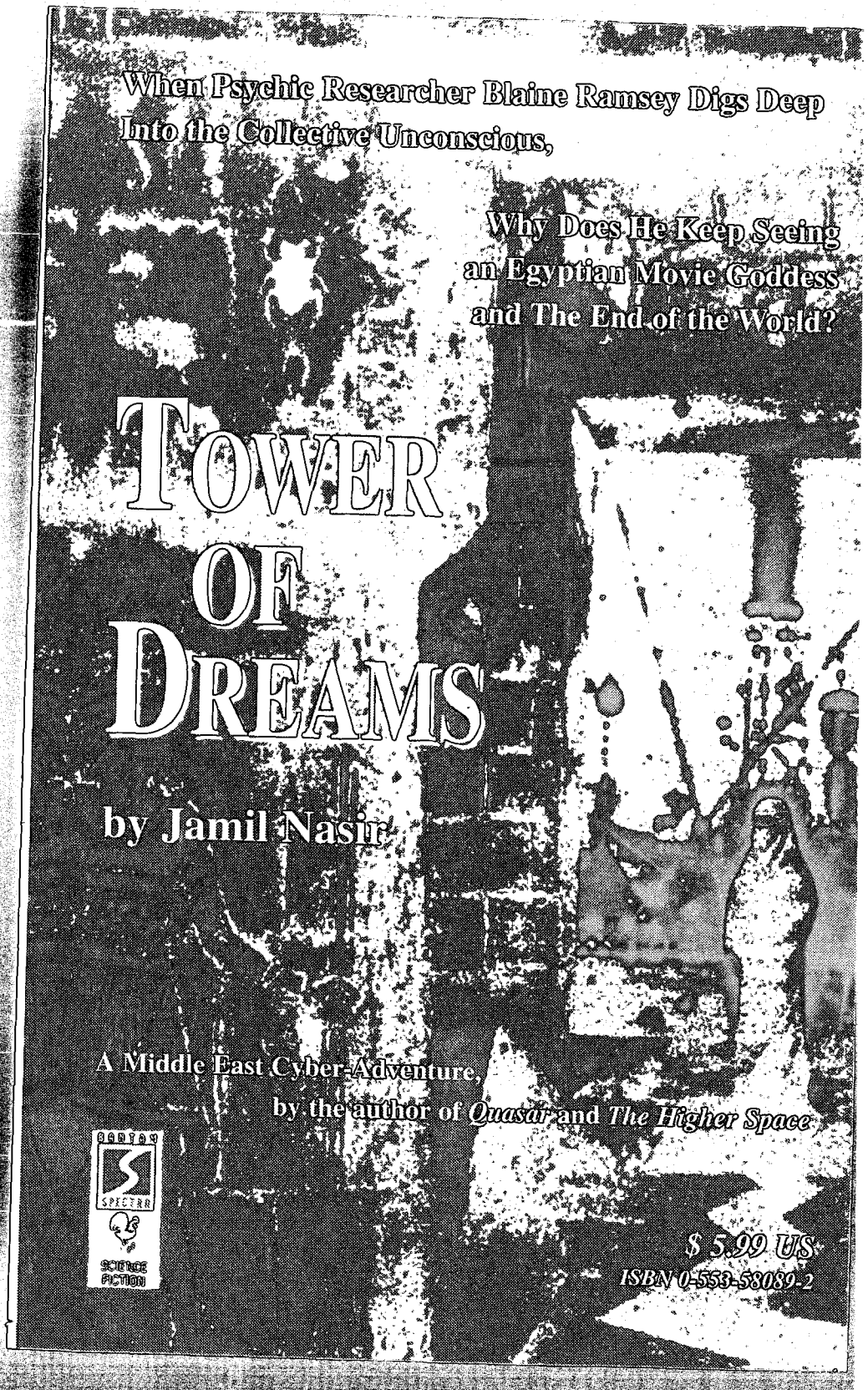
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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

MORE THOUGHTS ABOUT THE END OF THE WORLD

The announcements by astronomers in March of 1998 that a mile-wide asteroid was quite possibly going to hit the Earth in a little less than thirty years, followed by the news a day later that the asteroid wasn't going to smack into us after all, provided me with some grim fun in last month's column. For just one wild moment before the reprieve came, I wrote last time, I saw a solution to the problem of how to find all those trillions of dollars to pay for the baby-boomers' eventual Social Security checks. What problem? Just wipe out the world! Even if a few lawyers survive the cataclysm, there isn't going to be any government left to sue!

Well, none of that is going to happen. The asteroid will miss us by six hundred thousand miles. The aging but still jolly boomers in Leisure World City will have terrific end-of-the-world parties on the night before the asteroid's arrival in 2028, celebrating the calamity that isn't coming; Mick Jagger and Co. will clamber onto the Web for one more hoe-down; and the next day will dawn as usual while the evil asteroid goes whizzing harmlessly by us out there in space.

Which will, of course, still leave the government stuck for all those Social Security checks that those millions of retired boomers will be hoping to collect. The conventional wisdom today is that the money won't be paid, but you can bet it will. If necessary, we'll be printing hundred-dollar bills faster than an asteroid can travel, on the theory that an inflated currency lifts all boats, and what we used to call the penny postcard will cost a buck or two, but the Social Security moolah will be there for you, bouncing promptly into your electronic bank account on the first day of the month without fail. It had better be. All you spry old boomers will vote and vote and vote against anybody dumb enough to get in the way of that payout, and our Congressthings know it.

But we don't need to give up all hope of timely global destruction. Some other asteroid that offers less advance warning than 1997 XF11 may already be on its way toward us, unbeknownst even to the eagle-eyed astronomers who have vowed to scan the skies for such objects. And one of these days it will duly hit its target, with results more or less of the sort described in the Good Book, Second Epistle of Peter, Chap. 3, verse 10:

"But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which, the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up."

That will neatly take care of the outstanding Social Security debit, the common cold, the nightly traffic jams on your favorite freeways, and all manner of other little annoyances and dilemmas of modern life in one fell swoop. Those of you who yearn for this solution should keep on watching the skies—but don't tell anybody about anything you may see heading this way.

What, though, if we really did know that an inexorable and irrevocable deadline had been imposed

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upon the continuation of life on Earth? That some apocalyptic menace was traveling toward us, and would visit us within the next two, or three, or twenty years, and there wasn't a damn thing we could do to stave it off?

Well, the next verses of the Second Epistle of Peter offer this advice: "Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?" We should, we are told, "look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness."

St. Peter's advice—the end is nigh, think about moving along to a better place—is reflected in a more literal way in any number of classic science fiction stories. The first that comes to my mind is *When Worlds Collide* by Philip Wylie and Edwin Balmer (1932) in which Bronson Alpha and Bronson Beta, a pair of wandering planets, come hurtling in tandem toward the Earth, with Bronson Alpha on a direct collision course with us. Upon the discovery of which, a group of enlightened scientists hatches an organization called the League of Last Days that constructs a couple of atomic spaceships to carry a carefully chosen band of survival-worthy humans over to Bronson Beta, which is conveniently suitable for human habitation. Another fine old masterpiece is Garrett P. Serviss's *The Second Deluge* (1912): the world is going to pass through a watery nebula and be flooded to a depth of six miles, but the remarkable genius Cosmo Versal, though scoffed at by orthodox science, succeeds in building a splendid vessel in which a select few survive the debacle. And then there is J.T. McIntosh's *One in Three Hundred* (1954), in which the sun is go-

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ing to step up its energy output and bathe the Earth in flame for a few months—but there's enough warning so that a fleet of spaceships can be built, sufficient to carry one out of every 324.7 humans to safety on Mars. But that brings up the terrible problem of choosing the ones who are to survive, a puzzle that the author solves in a manner that's both excruciatingly dramatic and strikingly silly. And so forth.

I ask you, though, to think about the catastrophe that has no nifty solution—no handily available new planet for us to jump across to, no Cosmo Versal to build us an ark, no way of whipping up a fleet of little spaceships in the next couple of months that will convey some millions of us to Mars. The clock is ticking and we are doomed and that's that. How would we react? What would the condition of our lives be like under that non-negotiable deadline?

It will hardly come as news to you that each of us lives under such a deadline already. Life is finite; every last person who walked the Earth in the time of Abraham Lincoln is dead; unless something radical happens, no one who is reading this issue of *Asimov's* is going to be around in the year 2150. That's the way things are, no exceptions, no excuses accepted.

But our attitudes toward the inevitability of our own individual deaths are colored by a certain degree of denial. We know we're going to die, yes, but when we're young we don't really believe that, and even after the first intimations of mortality begin to manifest themselves—the graying hair, the slowing stride—most of us still like to believe that in our particular case the appointment with the grim reaper is going to be postponed for another thirty, forty, fifty years. All those dumb clucks who smoke too much or drink too much or can't be bothered to jog three miles before breakfast will duly have their numbers come up, and we will weep crocodile tears at their funerals, but we, we ourselves, we wise and healthy and very special people, will surely go on and on until our eighties or our nineties or even beyond. Though we know that death is lurking out there for us, we push the eventuality of it so far into our futures that it comes to have no real meaning for us. Which is nothing to apologize for: it's simply human nature.

Suppose, though, that that kind of denial was impossible: that we *knew,* we absolutely *knew,* the day and the hour and the moment when we and everybody on Earth would perish? The Church of England's Book of Common Prayer offers the entreaty, taken from Psalm 39, "Lord, let me know mine end, and the number of my days: that I may be certified how long I have to live." But what would life be like for us, I wonder, if we were to find out tomorrow that the world is going to end for each and every one of us, no fooling around and no way around it, on June 17, 2003? Or, let's say, June 17, 2023?

I think our existences would be transformed in ways that we can barely comprehend, and that—to the best of my recollection, but please do correct me if I'm wrong—have never been adequately dealt with in science fiction.

We'd find the news appalling, naturally. But there'd be weird little areas of satisfaction in it. "Maybe I'm going to die in four years," you might find yourself thinking, "but those bastards X and Y and Z won't have the satisfaction of surviving me." Small comfort, but comfort all the same, in its perverse way.

Would you, though, give up all worldly ambition, stop fretting about that promotion or that new car or that killer software application that you hope will make you the next bil-

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lionaire, and devote your remaining years to virtuous pursuits? Some of us will. For some of us, Mother Teresa will replace Bill Gates as the role model of choice. The decision will be an easy one for those of us who believe in the life hereafter and a glorious resurrection, but even some unbelievers will go that route, I suspect.

And some of us will go the other way. Ants will convert to grasshoppers overnight. Save for the future? What future? We'll eat, drink, and be merry, and to hell with the consequences. Why not? What harm is there in twenty extra pounds and a little more cholesterol, if you've got no chance of making it to a ripe old age anyway? So a lot of us will live it up round the clock, a process complicated by the fact that the whole apparatus of fun, the restaurants and nightclubs and all, will be crippled by the disappearance of crucially important employees. (Would *you* want to be putting in eight hours a night over a pizza oven while the rest of the world is enjoying the end-of-the-world ball?)

There'll be uglier stuff than that. Don't like your boss? Shoot him. It'll be very satisfying, and the sun will have gone nova, or the comet will have struck, or the cloud of cosmic rays will have arrived, before your lawyer has exhausted all your appeals. File a tax return? Strictly for dopes. Another few years and the IRS goes poof with all the rest of us. But without current tax revenues, how will government services (police, army, post office, highway maintenance) continue? Or you'd like to own the Mona Lisa? Go in there and grab it. There won't be any guards on duty at the Louvre: they'll all be down there on the Riviera enjoying a permanent holiday in the sun. Covet your neighbor's wife? Well, do something about it, dummy! The worst that can happen is that he'll shoot you, but probably he won't be all that annoyed. What difference does a little marital infidelity make, when the end is nigh?

And so on. A total breakdown of all social institutions seems highly probable to me: all rules suspended, all bets off. For each new Mother Teresa, we'll get five hundred new Jack the Rippers, and maybe some Attila the Huns, too. All restraints will be off, and we'll revert to what the philosophers used to call a state of nature, meaning raw savagery. And when the end does come, we'll all heave a big sigh of relief.

Yes? No? Aren't you glad we'll never find out? O

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On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

Which Way?

Taps

If there is one thing we know about the world wide web, it is that it changes much faster than the speed of print. Anything you read about it on dead trees is likely to be out of date. It's enough to give your columnist indigestion! In an earlier installment I mentioned in passing the top two on-line magazines printing original science fiction: *Tomorrow* and *Omni*. I had every intention of coming back one day to give them closer scrutiny. Both had migrated from print to the web with much fanfare. I, among others, hoped that they might provide models for the future of SF magazine publishing.

Alas, it was not to be.

When it debuted on the net, all the content on **Tomorrow** (*http://www.tomorrowsf.com*) was free; later it became a subscription site. Six issues for ten bucks seemed quite reasonable for stories by such writers as Yves Meynard, Kandis Elliot, Jerry Oltion, Geoffrey A. Landis, and editor Algis Budrys. *Tomorrow* had science articles, interviews, poems, and cartoons; there was an interesting mix. Poke around the site now and eventually you'll come upon an editorial by Budrys that reads in part: "Now, we are changing part of the nature of this magazine. While the nonfiction, poetry and cartoons will continue to be bought, the fiction from now on is going to be all mine, most of it from a time before most of you were born. . . . If any of you subscribers want your money back, I will gladly return it. But you might give it a try, first. I am not a bad writer." While this is certainly true, it is hard to imagine that notoriously parsimonious netfolk are going to pay good money for an all-Budrys-all-the-time site. *Tomorrow's* experiment of subscription SF on the web must be considered a failure.

More tragic is the passing of *Omni Online*. You see, once upon a time there was a beautiful magazine called *Omni*. It was the highest paying market in science fiction and, with a core audience of six hundred thousand, reached more readers than all the other SF magazines put together. Although Evil Suits killed the print version, it was reborn on the web in a format that was almost as beautiful as its print incarnation. For several years, *Omni Online* flourished artistically, if not financially. Then on April 30, 1998 it just . . . stopped. According to *Omni's* highly respected fiction editor, Ellen Datlow, ". . . corporate politics as much as anything killed *Omni* as a print and internet publication." The Evil Suits had struck again, only this time they neglected to dispose of the body. Omni is forgotten but not gone.

At least for now, you can still see the ghost of **Omni Online** (*http://www.omnimag.com*). There are plenty of interesting things to read: fine stories by Brian Stableford, Michael Kandel, Paul Park, and Michael Bishop, articles on science, a ton of

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links. It's just that there's nothing new. There's a film of dust on all the HTML. Your mouse clicks echo down the quiet frames. It's spooky!

The failures of *Tomorrow* and *Omni Online* have sent a chill through the professional SF community. They would seem to reinforce the common wisdom that no one is making money publishing on the web except pornographers. It's all well and good that Joe Trek and Jane Unicorn are putting up their stories on home-brewed web sites, but if the internet is the future of publishing, where will you read Robert Silverberg and Ursula K. Le Guin? Is it that the economic infrastructure does not yet exist in cyberspace to support a *Tomorrow*? Or is it that the net is intrinsically inhospitable to a professional magazine of the quality of *Omni Online*?

Which way the web?

Newest

As it happens, Ellen Datlow and some other *Omni* survivors think they know the answer. Three months after the demise of *Omni Online*, they launched **Event Horizon** (*http://www.e-horizon.com/eventhorizon*). As the press release says, "Maybe we're starry-eyed, but for the record, the former editors of *Omni* believe in content on the Web, too. We can, we have come to understand, keep a more modest e-zine afloat ourselves. At the moment, we expect no paycheck, nor any corporate benefits. Instead, we'll be getting something better: 100 percent ownership of our dream." Event Horizon is a handsome site that borrows a few ideas from *Omni* but is nevertheless its own self. It offers fiction by brand name authors, on-line interviews, the ubiquitous links page and opinion pieces by the likes of Barry Malzberg and Jack Womack. It also continues an experiment begun at *Omni Online* of four way collaborations posted in installments.

While it is way too soon to tell whether Event Horizon will succeed financially, I've seen more than enough to applaud its artistic ambition. It's a site that is definitely worth following.

Want to discover the hot new writers who will be publishing in the e-zines of the future? Try **The John W. Campbell Best New Writer Award Eligible Author Web Site** (*http://www.sff.net/campbell-awards*). Now there are a couple of Campbell awards but, as the title says, this is the one for best new writer, given each year at the WorldCon. Despite the name, the award does not always go to the best new writer; because of the way the rules are written, it sometimes favors quantity over quality. But when you consider that past winners include C.J. Cherryh, Orson Scott Card, Lucius Shepard, and Karen Joy Fowler, its record at picking stars of the future is impressive. The centerpiece of this site is the page on which up-and-coming authors (and potential Campbell nominees) are encouraged to list their bibliographies. There are a lot of writers publishing and the field gets more crowded with each passing day. It's probably impossible to keep track of all the new arrivals, but the Campbell Eligible Author Web Site is a big help.

If you absolutely, positively can't wait to find out what's happening *right now* in SF, then you need **Sci-Fi Wire** (*http://www.scifi.com/scifiwire*), part of the sprawling site of the Sci-Fi Channel. Don't expect deep analysis from Sci-Fi Wire; it's really just a headline service. The editors sort their stories into various categories, including film, television, print, internet, science and fandom. Perhaps because it is a creature of media masters, Sci-Fi Wire's strength is reporting on film and TV, but it

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does a more than adequate job with print. And the news just doesn't get any newer.

Linkage

Our genre has always had an unfortunate tendency to hyperbole. Did *Astounding* really astound its readers? Were the stories in *Fantastic* all that fantastic? So the fact that there is a site called **The Ultimate Science Fiction Web Guide** (*http://www.magicdragon.com/UltimateSF/SF-Index.html*) should come as no surprise. Ultimate claims to have over five thousand links to science fiction and web resources. This may well be true: I confess I didn't take the time to count.

Do not trust your first impression of this site. The design concept here is to fill every last pixel with text, all on a background of screaming Jell-O green. It reminds me of that polyester shirt I had back during disco—but let's not go there. As you explore, you might suspect that it's a ghost site like Omni. The very first link on its long list is for *sneak preview* of *Starship Troopers,* the bug-strewn flop that I saw on *video* three months ago. But it turns out that this link actually leads to a savvy and ten-minutes-into-the-future movie page in which projects that are still rumorware are previewed. Scroll though the truly impressive list of author links and then click over to the *If You Like This, Then You'll Like That* page. This useful feature sorts an enormous number of books by subject matter. Got a thing for cyberpunks, dinosaurs, or utopias? Then *If You Like This, Then You'll Like That* has a reading list for you. While The Ultimate Science Fiction Web Guide is no beauty, it does repay the intrepid visitor.

Similar in style and substance is the **Science Fiction Resource Guide** (*http://sflovers.rutgers.edu/archive/Web/SFRG/sf-resource.guide.html*). Once again, very little imagination has been wasted on design, although at least the background here is not so garish, sort of the color of eggnog, and the links are much easier to see. While there is necessarily a great deal of overlap with Ultimate, especially in the author, media, and 'zine links, SFRG does a far better job of covering the wonderful world of fandom, with links to clubs and mailing lists and fannish home pages. It offers gateways to some of the more specialized nooks of fandom, like gaming, costuming, and (gulp) furry fandom, of which more in a moment. I was also impressed to discover that SFRG has mirror sites in Canada, the UK, France, Sweden, Germany, and Spain. And why not? SFRG is the perfect starting place for exploring science fiction on the web.

I first stumbled across furry fandom while ego-surfing. *Ego-surfing,* you know, typing your name into a search engine to see what pops up. It so happens that some of my novels and stories have featured fur-bearing characters, which bring them into the compass of this unique interest group. Furry fans are people who like animal cartoons or anthropomorphic animals—a lot. They read about them in books and magazines, buy stacks of comics, watch them on video. Over time a furry fan may evolve into a *furry.* "A furry is anyone who actually has an instinct or compulsion to be an anthropomorphic animal, or can relate closely with some species in the Animal Kingdom," according to **The Furry Resource Page** (*http://www.fur.com/furry*). I must say I am bemused by much of what goes on in furry fandom but I can't help but be impressed by how wonderfully science fictional their obsessions are. As the Bard said, "O brave new world, that has such people in't!"

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The Way of All Flesh

I just love **The Mind Uploading Home Page** *(http://sunsite.unc.edu/jstrout/uploading/MUHomePage.html).* This no-nonsense site explores the possibility that we may someday be able to separate our minds from our bodies and transfer them into an artificial environment. There are no pretty graphics here; the welcome page is a linked outline of the subject. But Joe Strout, a graduate student in the Department of Neuroscience at UC, San Diego, has given us some outstanding research. He explains and evaluates all the proposed methods from extracting the self from its meat container. For example, in the microtome procedure ". . . the patient's brain (possibly entire head) is made solid, either by perfusing with (for example) paraffin, or by freezing to liquid nitrogen temperatures. Next, the brain is cut into very thin slices." Hey, nobody said this will be a picnic! Strout guesses that uploading is between fifty and a hundred and fifty years away. He discusses the philosophy of mind uploading and its economic and social implications. The Mind Uploading Home Page is a serious look at a not-yet technology that could change everything. As the site promises, "Robots shall inherit the Earth; and they shall be Us."

Exit

In an earlier column I commended **Bibliofind** *(http://www.bibliofind.com)* to your attention as a search engine for finding used, rare or out-of-print books. Since then, astute reader Fred Christensen of Urbana, IL, has pointed my browser toward **MX Bookfinder** *(http://mxbf.com/).* The MX BookFinder is brought to you by Anirvan Chatterjee, a graduate student at UC, Berkeley. Not only will it search Bibliocity, but it will also query Interloc, ABE, Antiqubook, Amazon.com, and Powell's Books for the whereabouts of your lost treasures. Check it out, but please be careful. Once you go there, you may never return. MX Bookfinder is the bibliophile's Never-Never Land.

By the way, I encourage you all to show me which way to go on the web. Cyberspace is vast; I've only got two eyes. O

We welcome your letters, which should be sent to ***Asimov's,*** 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. (asimovs@erols.com) Space and time make it impossible to print or answer all letters, but please include your mailing address even if you use e-mail. If you don't want your address printed, put it only in the heading of your letter; if you do want it printed, please put your address under your signature. We reserve the right to shorten and copy-edit letters. The e-mail address is for editorial correspondence *only*—please direct all subscription inquiries to: P. O. Box 54033, Boulder, Co 80322-4033.

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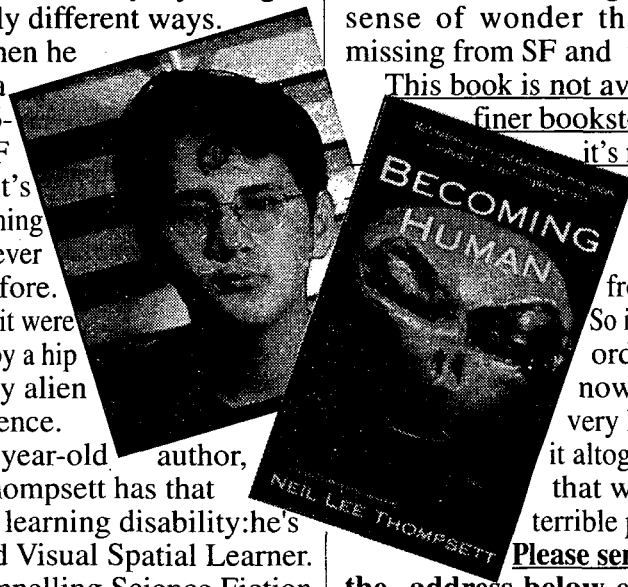
Gifted 13-year-old author, Neil Lee Thompsett, brings back that fresh, innocent, sense of wonder

When a gifted 13 yr- old kid has a serious learning disability, he perceives everyday things in totally different ways. And when he writes a big 326-page SF novel, it's like nothing you've ever read before. It's as if it were written by a hip but edgy alien intelligence.



13 year-old author, Neil Thompsett has that kind of learning disability:he's a Gifted Visual Spatial Learner. His compelling Science Fiction novel, Becoming Human, has already gained a cult following among both know-it-all teens and cynical old SF fans. It's a flash-flood of action controlled by a strong, fascinating concept. His fresh innocence brings back that sense of wonder that's been missing from SF and from you.

This book is not available in finer bookstores. And it's not even in crummy ones. It is only sold from this ad. So if you don't order it right now, you will very likely miss it altogether. And that would be a terrible pity indeed **Please send in $8 to the address below** and get an autographed copy of this truly remarkable novel Becoming Human before stocks run out.

Or don't - and don't.

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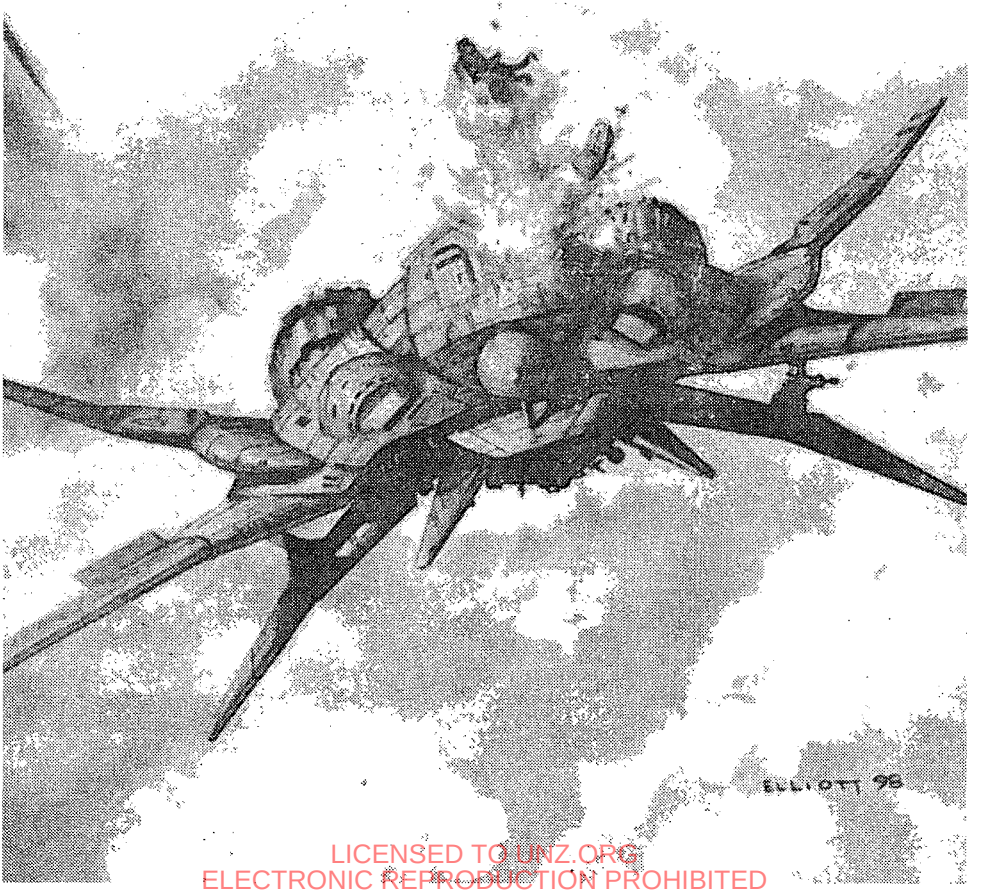
R. Garcia y Robertson

DIANA BY STARLIGHT

Our latest masterful adventure tale by R. Garcia y Robertson is set in the same universe as "Starfall" (*Asimov's*, July 1998). The author's most recent books, *American Woman* (Forge) and *The Moon Maid* (Golden Gryphon Press), received outstanding reviews. *American Woman* will soon be out in paperback.

Illustration by Darryl Elliott



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Planetfall

Diana didn't like the look of her escorts. Two hulking robo-guards with blast visors for faces met her as she stepped off the Orion Lines packet, taking up stations to port and starboard. With them came her reception committee, a crisp 3V major-domo, a hologram Count of Monte Cristo wearing silver braid and a smug virtual smile.

She shook her blonde head emphatically. "I don't need bodyguards." Diana hated arguing with holos, but she meant to preserve her diplomatic status. She had come insystem armed with nothing but good intentions, and tolerating two plasti-metal monstrosities meant admitting that she might need them. Diplomatic immunity was like virginity—once lost, you had to go through hell to get it back. Diana had done it enough times to know.

The holo bowed, clicking 3V heels to show off his sound effects. "There has been an attempt on your life."

"You don't say?" Diana arched an eyebrow. No one had mentioned that people were *already* out to get her. Pretty grim welcome. Some folks did not like diplomacy—or diplomats—and were not ashamed to show it. Which made the shuttle that had come to fetch her no longer seem safe. Her immediate impulse was to call *Hyperion,* to return to the safety of her suite aboard the packet, protected by Orion Lines and ultra-hard shielding. Ships that blasted through the interstellar medium at near light speed were not harmed by normal means.

But the shuttle lock had started to cycle, breaking contact with the packet. *Hyperion* was falling away on a diverging orbit, headed for Beanstalk Station, leaving the shuttle poised for reentry. And Diana had not come five trillion kilometers just to sit in orbit; she had come to fix the mess on Ares. Apparently, someone thought enough of her chances to try and kill her first.

Patching into the system comnet, she punched a call through to Baron Guy D'Montjoy—the man she'd come to meet. Transceivers in her head bounced a boosted signal off the Beanstalk geosync station to the good baron aboard his private aerostat, floating several klicks above the surface of Ares. The virtual image beamed to her from half a world away was stock stuff—Baron D'Montjoy in the formal gardens of his aerial palace, backed by a towering cloudscape. Her sponsor and onplanet protector looked genteelly handsome in his silver-embroidered surcoat, baron's coronet, and neat goatee. He sat handfeeding a hooded falcon perched on a red-leather rest, a hybrid peregrine with a coppery green sheen to her wings. A magnificent falcoform.

If it even existed. Image was everything with Guy D'Montjoy. The Baron Guy might *really* be in his bath, along with a pair of nubile houris—his feet up, having his toenails pared and his ears licked. No 3V cast could be trusted.

("Lady Diana,") he cooed, giving his bird a bit of meat. ("Welcome to Ares. You are looking especially buoyant.")

("I'm breathing. Apparently an accomplishment.") Internal sensors told her that the shuttle was sending out an unscrambled 3V scan. D'Montjoy was getting a true picture, even if she were not.

("So I am informed.") Guy faked concern. Who knew what his real feelings were? Diana's personal detectors didn't work at a distance—the whole point of risking a face-to-face.

All she could do was turn up the charm, hiding behind blonde hair and a thousand megawatt smile. If arguing with a holo felt foolish, buttering one

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up was a dozen times worse—but she was entitled to *details*. Her position demanded it. ("When and where was I supposed to die?")

("Right where you are.") Baron Guy preened his bird of prey. ("The assassin got aboard the shuttle in disguise. You owe your life to alert underlings.")

She acted dutifully impressed. ("Reward them for me.")

("It has been done.") D'Montjoy assured her.

Thanking him, Diana signed off. She wouldn't know how badly Baron Guy was lying until they met in person. But she was not falling for the rich, dark, and oily routine. She had never fallen for a guy like Guy. Not in thirty lifetimes.

She was left with the smug, vacuous major-domo, so hollow she could put her hand through him—poor company and no protection. The lock door dilated, revealing the shuttle's cabin. Twin rows of tombstone-white seat backs lined the narrow aisle leading to the crew couches, command console, and 3V viewing screens.

Baby-strapped to the co-pilot's couch—so he could not reach the harness release on the seatback—was a huge broad-shouldered brute, who could only be her attempted assassin. Dressed in a torn Orion Lines uniform, he was clearly some sort of surface barbarian, half-Thal and semi-human. How could anyone hope to fob off this hopeless savage as an Orion Lines employee? He would have had a better chance putting on a ball gown and passing as a ballerina.

Past being polite, Diana turned her most imperious "Lady Diana" look at the major-domo. "What is the meaning of this?"

"We are taking him down for interrogation," the holo explained. "Orion Lines wanted nothing to do with him. . . ."

"Nor do I," Diana replied icily, not the least keen on dropping into atmosphere with her would-be assassin strapped next to her on a control couch.

"Every precaution has been taken," his hollowness indicated the two robo-guards. Easy for a *holo* to say! The empty-headed major-domo was somewhere safe on Ares—if he existed at all. Full of fawning reassurance, he tried to seat her at the rear of the cabin, "Where you can be both safe and comfortable. . . ."

Diana snorted and stepped through him. Striding down the aisle, she strapped herself into the crew chief's couch, directly behind the control couches—aiming to be right in the action. Here she could reach out and touch her would-be killer. Were she so inclined. She told the holo, "Let's get started."

He bowed again. Robo-guards stationed themselves on either side of her. Shuttle engines ignited with a thump. Retro-burn pressed her back into the seat—planetfall loomed ahead. Diana made swift contact with her suite aboard *Hyperion*. ("Brace for bad news. There's been an assassination attempt.")

Replies flooded back from shocked subordinates alarmed by the nasty turn of events. She cut them short. ("I'm heading in. Go to code yellow. Keep your heads down and the channel clear—don't leave the suite until I say so.")

With her official family tucked safely away, she turned back to the situation onboard. She and her attempted assassin were the only humans (or semi-humans). An over-polite holo, two menacing robo-guards, and the autopilot rounded out the shuttle crew. Good enough. That was about all she could handle.

She stared at the back of the assassin's head. He had shaggy black hair

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and weather-beaten skin—which went with the big arms and broad Thal shoulders. A hard case if ever she saw one. What was he thinking? Soon everyone would know. He was headed for brainscrub, at the very least. She shuddered, feeling suddenly sorry for the poor brute. A disposable pawn in a deadly game. How had he meant to kill her? Probably with his bare hands. He had the strength for it. Hiding a weapon in that tight Orion Lines uniform would be an unnecessary complication. Nor did he seem the type to go for something subtle. Unlike most folks, Diana knew how it felt to die, having done it dozens of times. Though never by homicidal violence. That would have been new and different.

Why did he want to kill her? No mystery there. Way too many people profited from the ongoing war. Any of them could have bribed, forced, or tricked him into doing it. Peacemakers were surprisingly unpopular. Often getting the Gandhi Good-Bye. Or ending up nailed to a cross.

Beyond the savage's black-haired head, the crimson limb of the planet filled the starboard screen, backed by an awesome view of the Orion Nebula, a red-blue panorama of billowing gas and galactic debris, sprinkled with stars-in-the-making. Ares was a world worth fighting for—a one-in-a-million earth-type planet in the final stages of terraforming. Red deserts and green "sea bottoms" showed through high thin clouds. Diana spotted a warship in low orbit, a corvette on picket duty, lurking amid the stars of Dawn Cluster.

Beautiful place—at least from orbit. Too bad the locals were happily killing each other. A situation she was supposed to somehow correct.

Corona flared up, blanking the screens. As they hit the upper atmosphere, a fiery sheath of ionized air enveloped the shuttle. The ghostly major-domo flickered and vanished, along with his foxy smile. Communications black-out was complete. Diana liked being cut off from the cosmos. Too much had happened too quickly, most of it in her head—instant communication could be incredibly wearing. Her augmented mental circuitry had to deal with the situation aboard the shuttle, her team back on *Hyperion,* plus Guy D'Montjoy's bullshit-and-bird show.

Her moment of peace lasted about a nanosecond. Without warning, the whole control console flashed red. Alarms blared. Cabin pressure plummeted. A voice inside her head shouted a warning. ("Autopilot's out! Get to the controls!")

She hit her seat strap release, frantic to get to the command couch before g-forces built up. Since her latest childhood, she had not flown anything more complicated than a hovercar. But she had thirty Dianas in her head, electronic ghosts of past lives, going all the way back to the first Diana. Buried in her augmented brain were the memories of Diana XX—a truly hot pilot, until she racked up an orbiter in the Glory system. Getting Diana XX to the controls would give her half a chance.

Plasti-steel fingers grabbed her arms. Her "bodyguards" forced her back into her seat. She shouted for the robo-guards to let go. Their grip tightened. Audio-command circuits had been disabled. Programmed not to harm a human, they probably thought they were doing her a favor, keeping her safely seated during an inflight emergency.

Diana twisted in their grip, decompression stabbing at her ears. She pictured Guy D'Montjoy's saber-tooth smile. Here was the real assassination attempt. Unless she did something *at once,* her deaf-and-dumb defenders were going to kill her. The savage in the seat ahead tore at his straps. He was a huge helpless sacrifice, meant to shift suspicion away from her hosts. When

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the shuttle came crashing down from orbit, she would be found in the wreck with her robo-guards at her side, as if every attempt had been made to save her. Clever misdirection by whomever was planning her demise. . . .

She had seconds to change that scenario. Fighting the first dreamy stages of hypoxia, Diana kicked off her jump boots. She never wore stockings, and yoga every morning kept her supple. Leaning back in her seat, she hoisted her left foot over her head, kicking the emergency oxygen button. Air gushed into the cabin. At the same time her right toes flicked the release on the back of the savage's couch.

Giving a tremendous bellow the barbarian burst out of his seat, twenty stone of enraged savage with heavy brow-ridges and angry deep-set eyes, looking ready to do murder. Grabbing the nearest robo-guard, he gave a roar and tried to wrench off its plasti-metal head.

Letting go of her, the robo-guard strove to defend itself without doing damage to its attacker. Together they raised a deafening row, while the remaining robot clung stubbornly to her right arm. Time to find out just how hot a pilot Diana XX really was. Could she fly an out-of-control shuttle with her feet?

("Not to worry, Love.") Her dead self did not seem the least concerned. Trapped in an unpiloted shuttle, tumbling out of orbit, with a psychotic robot hanging on her arm—Diana XX said No Problem. She had waltzed away from worse. Far worse. Fortunately, she had no memory of the crash that killed her. ("Here goes . . .") The manual thrusters sat between the command couches where either pilot could reach them. Pushing with her foot, she gave the shuttle a shot of forward retros.

Instantly the cabin pitched forward, tossing Diana onto the control console, with the robo-guard half on top of her. Twisting about she applied reverse thrust, slamming herself into the command couch, the robot still clinging gamely to her arm.

Strapping herself in, she tried to reboot the autopilot. ("No go. System dead.") That would have been too easy. Diana XX had to fly the shuttle on her own, using a porthole to fix the planet's horizon, estimating her angle of attack while holding the ship steady on all three axes. With a deranged robot hanging on her arm, and a battle royal raging behind her. The savage was still trying to tear parts off the other robo-guard, which struggled peaceably to restrain him. Neither was making much headway.

None of this fazed Diana XX. The dead woman in Diana's head lined up the angle by eye, working the thrusters left-handed. Having such determined dead people living in your head could be scary at times. G-forces built up, pressing Diana back into the couch, dragging at the hand on the controls.

The robot held tight to her arm, getting heavier and heavier with deceleration, wrenching at her flesh. She screamed at the beastly machine to let go, but it remained deaf as ever. Nor did Diana XX seem to mind. Unlike herself, memories did not suffer—all their pain lay in the past. She kept piling on the g-forces, remorseless and implacable, keeping the shuttle from skipping off into space. Re-entry angles were exact. Arms could be replaced.

G-forces continued to grow, making it harder to move the controls. She clung to the thrust lever, struggling to maintain her level of attack. The robo-guard let go, nearly taking her arm with it. Robots were supposed to do no harm, but she saw the blue marks of mechanical fingers dug into her flesh. What should she do? Sue the manufacturer? Diana XX was delighted to have use of the damaged arm as she fought to steady the falling shuttle. Bangs

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and thumps buffeted the ship, like an auto-bar blender gone berserk. They were hitting thicker air. Time to get the nose down to an aerodynamic angle, to start flying instead of falling. She pushed the pitch control forward.

("No go.") Thrusters were not bringing the nose down. What the hell had happened? Diana XX coolly came up with the answer. ("We're too low. Thrusters can't buck the thick air. Switch to aerodynamic control.")

She hit manual override. Again, no go. Diana XX explained. ("Thrusters are a simple on-off system. Aerodynamic controls go through the autopilot; both are disabled by the onboard virus.")

"Bugger!" Diana saw an appalling smash-up headed their way. Unable to cope with the thickening air, the shuttle would tumble out of control into the ground. She glanced over her shoulder. The savage clung to a seat a couple of rows back, a deranged look in his deep-set eyes, no longer trying to tackle the robo-guards. G-forces had wrung the fight out of him.

"Come here," she commanded. He stared blankly back at her, his Orion Lines uniform hanging in bloody tatters, looking like a cabin attendant on the flight from Hell. Blunt barbarian features included a big square jaw, making him at least half *Homo Sapiens,* but that didn't mean he knew Universal. She had no *sure* way of knowing if he had really come aboard to kill her, so she meant to give him a chance to live. A decent chance was all anyone got.

G-forces slackened. Diana leaped up and snagged her boots, pulling them back on her feet. "Come here or you're dead!" she shouted. That seemed to spark some interest. His big jaw dropped, as if he meant to speak. It was hardly the time for a chat. "Get over here!" she ordered, grabbing hold of his sleeve.

He staggered upright, clawing his way forward. Robo-guards rose up behind him, ready for another round. Even impending destruction did not discourage their simple-minded circuitry. They remained bent on holding both passengers securely in place until the shuttle slammed into the ground. Diana XX warned her. ("We're headed into a spin.")

She pulled the barbarian to her, holding tight to his huge biceps—with the robo-guards right behind him. Metal fingers reached out for them. Strapping herself back into the control couch, she yelled, "Hang on!"

The shuttle started spinning madly, whirling end-over-end, pinning the savage against the controls, tossing the robo-guards into a heap amid the rear seats. Diana—the only one strapped in—strained to stay focused, her gaze centered on the controls, fighting vertigo as she watched the altimeter tumble. 16,000 meters. 14,000. 12,000. 10,000 . . .

They had one way out, and not a good one: The spacecraft was tumbling out of orbit, corkscrewing wildly. Trying to eject meant slamming sideways into a howling wall of air that would saw her in two. While staying aboard meant auguring-in, boring a deep hole in some dead sea bottom. But Diana XX had a last trick up her invisible sleeve. The shuttle had a runway brake, a drag chute allowing her to land on the flight deck of an aerostat. Diana quizzed her long dead self. ("Will it work?")

("Wait and see.")

The ground whirled up to meet them. 8,000. 6,000. 4,000 . . . At 3,000 meters Diana XX popped the chute. *Wham-bam.* The shuttle whipped tail-up. Spin dampened. Robo-guards came hurtling toward them, crashing through the seats.

Pulling the barbarian down on top of her, Diana told him, "Hold on if you

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want to live." His torn tunic and immense chest hid the instruments. If he clipped the hull going out, it could cost him an arm, or a leg, or take off both their heads. Wrapping her outboard leg around his thigh, she said a swift prayer to St. Priscilla, then jerked the release.

Bang, the hull flew open. A second blast blew Diana out of the shuttle, still seated in the command couch, clutching the horrified savage. He let out a howl as they hurtled through the air. Weight vanished. They were falling free. Slowly at first—Ares' pull was only one-third g. Diana XX shouted at her. ("Pull the chute lever!")

She jerked so hard that the red plastic handle came off in her hand.

Wham again. The jolt from the chute opening tore the barbarian out of her grasp, leaving bits of his flesh under her fingernails. He flew backward, wide-eyed and horrified, headed for the ground below.

Her leg caught him, still hooked around his thigh. She hit her harness release, and lunged forward, grabbing a handful of tunic. For a second they hung there, off balance, half out of the seat, teetering on the brink.

But she had held onto her harness strap. Hauling herself back aboard the falling command couch, she pulled the savage in with her. The wreck of the shuttle shot past, headed for a hard landing, the drag chute pinwheeling in the ship's wake.

Silence descended. Dark lavender sky spun overhead. Red-green planet whirled below. They were safe—for the moment. Heaven knows what the ground would be like. The barbarian atop her had grabbed hold of the seat harness, not at all liking the view from a couple of kilometers up. Definitely an all-four-feet-on-the-ground type. Since he didn't seem likely to try to strangle her in midair, she took the moment to punch a call through to her suite aboard *Hyperion*.

Alec, her aide-de-camp, sat with his leg cocked over her personal work station, communicators wide open. His latest biosculpt had Alec looking brash and boyish, giving all the appearance of youth. The visual coming in from the command couch almost knocked him off his handsome butt. He could see sky whirling past, and the savage on her lap. ("What in hell is happening?")

("Way too much.") She was not even going to get started. ("I'm zipping you a scrambled update. Meantime, I'm headed dirtside—fix my landing position.")

His perfect aplomb punctured, Alec shook dark tousled hair out of his eyes. ("What happened to your shuttle?")

("Should be impacting about now.")

("You're not cleared for a surface landing.")

("Do I have a choice? Just fix me for a pick-up.") Diana broke contact. She did not mean to give out details on an unsecured channel. Having missed her once, they were bound to try again. Besides, she had an unauthorized landing coming up.

Green bottom-land rose to greet her. Not fully terraformed, Ares remained almost treeless, aside from the wooded tracts lining the canal net. The dark *mare* visible from orbit were the remains of ancient seas, boiled away ages ago, and now covered by a springy carpet of low vegetation. Perfect for an unplanned crack-up. Diana XX told her, ("Brace for impact.")

She passed the warning to her seat mate: "Hold tight!" The barbarian looked blankly back at her, as if he really didn't know Universal. If that was true, everything she had said so far must have been perfectly unintelligible.

They hit. Then bounced high. Startled by the impact, the savage's eyes

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went wide. They hit again, with the seat absorbing most of the blow—but the surprised barbarian lost his grip. Unable to hold him, she saw the savage go flying butt-over-browridge into the low greenery. The couch bounced once more, then cartwheeled to a stop on the dead sea bottom. They were down. And not before time, either.

Dirtside

Unstrapping herself, she struggled upright, getting her land legs back. What a way to arrive! For the first time in over a year she stood on a planet's surface, feeling wind in her face—instead of recycled air—struck by that immensity of distance you never got on shipboard, or in a low-g habitat. Even 3V barely mimicked it.

Diana did a swift 360, surveying the remains of the dead sea bottom—left by one of Ares' primeval oceans, dried up eons back. Flat vegetation stretched off in all directions beneath a violet bowl of sky and twin red suns. To the east, a herd of oversized ungulates grazed at the base of low hills. South of her, scarlet highlands rose to meet a broad pink escarpment. To westward, a floating city drifted before a scattered cloud front.

Breathtaking. Standing ankle-deep in the green tangle covering the ancient sea bottom, she saw why Ares was so coveted. Why the inhabitants didn't want offworlders so much as setting foot on her surface.

But she had no time to savor the scenery. Getting to the surface had nearly killed her, and no doubt Baron Guy would be aching to finish the job. Dirtsiders were equally likely to club her to death out-of-hand. And these sea bottoms crawled with predators that might easily decide she'd be a good choice for lunch. Just tallying her troubles made her tired. Dressed for a diplomatic reception, not a crash landing, she wore a pin-striped body-suit and a green ambassador's jacket. Warm enough for now, but when the Twin Suns set, it would get cold. At least her boots were good.

She saw the savage pick himself up out of the greenery and immediately rearrange his wardrobe. Ripping open the crotch of his Orion Lines uniform, he tore the slashed left sleeve off his tunic, turning it into a makeshift breechcloth. Showing typical Thal unconcern, he left the right sleeve on, as well as his torn pants legs, making a rather mixed fashion statement.

Kicking off the uniform boots, he struck out eastward, thrashing off through the low greenery without so much as a thank you. His back to the floating city, he headed for the ungulate herd and the red ocher hills beyond, putting distance between himself and the crash site. Diana didn't blame him. Grabbing the command couch's survival kit, she set off across the sea bottom after him, hoping he knew where he was going.

Calls started coming in. First a scrambled message from her suite aboard *Hyperion.* Alec had been joined by Marta, her second-in-command, a big serious-minded woman with frizzy hair and green eyes. Her solidity helped offset Alec's easy insolence. She spoke coolly into space, not knowing if Diana was even receiving—by now she might easily be addressing the dead. ("Orion Lines refuses to do a pick-up. By treaty, they can't go beyond Beanstalk station.")

Aside from the savage striding ahead of her, none of them had authority to be on the surface. Diana's diplomatic credentials did not extend past Beanstalk station—down here she was trespassing, violating her immunity, forfeiting diplomatic status. Not that she had much choice.

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("Baron D'Montjoy is sending a ship to get you. We made it clear he was acting on his own, and that the Peace Corps could not countenance any violation of the surface agreements.")

("We told him to haul arse out.") Alec did not want Diana assuming that they had been too diplomatic. Her aide-de-camp had had his testosterone hiked during his latest biosculpt—bringing out an unprofessional belligerence, plus a tendency to make passes at his boss. Well into his second century, Alec still struggled with the body and hormones of a teenager.

Marta went on. ("We have secured a landing permit, and gotten a line on an orbital yacht. . . .")

Alec cut in again. ("A surface-to-orbit VTOL scramjet.")

(". . . and will keep you posted. Good luck.") Marta ended transmission.

Diana did not acknowledge. They would not expect her to—any signal she sent could be traced to its source. Why let her enemies know which way she was headed? Nor did she acknowledge the next call, Baron D'Montjoy's assurance that help was on the way. Her "accident" had already become an excuse to violate the accords she had come to uphold.

Looking over her shoulder, she saw a silver spark separate from the floating city, hover for a moment, then head her way. Diana started to run. None of her options looked good. The flat sea bottom offered no cover. Fliers spiraling out from the crash site would easily pick up her heat trace. Even if she burrowed into the vegetation her body heat would stand out like a flare in the dark. A heat-seeking missile could swiftly finish her off.

The savage ahead of her also broke into a sprint, and started making hooting sounds. Noises that did not match any of the surface dialects Diana carried around in her head.

The ungulates looked up, their big ears cocked. Wrinkled eyes stared at the hooting savage who was heading toward them. They were colossal gray beasts, with four pillar-like legs, massive shoulders, huge thick necks, and long dour faces. *Baluchitherium giganti,* a hornless, long-necked retrobred rhinoceros, as big as a brontosaur. Diana could hardly believe that they would bother to notice anything merely human-sized.

Glancing back, she saw the silver spark gaining. If she had any warning, she would send a last call up to the suite, putting Marta in command. But most likely there would be no warning, just a blast from above. Unless they thought she might somehow be useful alive. Highly unlikely. She was useless as a bargaining chip. Peace Corps would give nothing to get her back; nor would brainscrub work on her. Taking her alive served no real purpose, unless Baron Guy liked to play with captives. Just for the fun of it.

She ran faster. Ahead, she saw the savage speed up as well—still hooting like a maniac.

And the herd responded! The great brontosaurian beasts swung about and shuffled toward them, stretching their necks, starting to gallop. Clearly a conscious action, a coordinated movement by the entire herd. Diana stopped, heart pounding, chest heaving, half forgetting the flier overhead. If these *B. giganti* galloped over her, there would be nothing left to target. She would be ground into the low growth underfoot. If not . . .

As the herd came on, it divided, enveloping her and the barbarian. She found herself surrounded by a forest of hugely tall legs, supporting twenty-ton bodies that seemed to hang in the sky above her, as if disconnected from the ground. A few clustered about the crash site, using their long necks to nose through the wreckage. But the bulk of the herd began to drift south-

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eastward, back the way they had come, providing a great fleshy canopy that blocked airborne sensors and obliterated her trail.

She walked slowly along with the herd. Other beasts joined in, smaller herbivores who had fallen behind in the mad gallop—zebras, tiny antelope, and tall steppe gazelle. Hyenas trotted after them, hungrily eyeing the zebras. None of them showed any interest in her—an unimportant speck in the living landscape. Thank goodness.

More calls came in—mostly exasperated signals from her pursuers. A semi-rigid directed the search, coordinating the efforts of several ultralights. They flew over the herds, unable to see through the dust and bodies, frustrated by thousands upon thousands of heat traces. Others swept the crash site, not turning up so much as a bootprint. All these calls came in the clear—"proof" of their good intentions. She felt mildly entertained by the exchanges between the semi-rigid and her suite aboard *Hyperion*—the searchers supplying unwanted assurances, and Alec telling them to sod off.

Slowly, these amusing exchanges faded. There was nothing left to snipe about. She was gone, lost to everyone, swallowed up by the surface of Ares.

Alone with her thoughts, she now had time to get mad. Nauseatingly angry. And scared as well. During her wild fall from orbit, she had been too busy to be frightened. Here, the utter hopelessness of her position sank in. Her mission had hit bottom. The man who invited her insystem meant to murder her, blaming it on the other side. And he could easily still do it. Even if she managed to somehow lose herself, she would be as good as dead. The only sure way offplanet was the Beanstalk, half a world away, and bound to be closely watched.

After anger came fatigue. Falling from orbit, followed by a crash landing and forced march, took its toll. She felt beaten and exhausted. Brain cells and synapses screamed for rest. Tottering on her feet, she watched the savage stroll ahead of her, seemingly unaffected. Admiring his natural stamina, Diana fished through the seat survival pack, finding the medikit. Strapping it on, she called for stimulants to keep her upright. Chemical support surged through her, putting bounce back in her step. Somehow she would survive, if only to wipe the biosculpted smirk off Baron Guy D'Montjoy's face.

When the herd reached the base of red-rock highlands, the savage left his living cover, disappearing up a steep draw. A smart move, one he must have been planning for some time—the narrow draw would give decent overhead cover, and bare feet would leave no tracks on the stony floor. So far, his every move had been perfectly timed to escape from an impossible situation—defenseless and afoot on a flat plain, hounded by airships, ultralights, and infrared sensors. Diana could hardly do better than to keep following him.

Picking her way up the shadowy draw, she glanced over her shoulder, scanning the darkening sky for sign of pursuit. The lower of the two suns just touched the flat horizon. Ares' two smaller moons, Rhesus and Alcippe, were up and shining, along with several of the brighter stars. Far out over the plain, she saw reddish light reflected off the underbelly of the semi-rigid. Also a flash off the wing of an ultralight, headed the wrong way.

Turning back to the draw, she saw the barbarian waiting above her, wearing the tattered remains of his Orion Lines uniform and hefting a rock. He gave a grunt and hoot that meant, "Go away."

"And a good evening to you, too." Diana leaned against the side of the draw, sizing him up. Massing more than a hundred kilos, he had arms as thick as her calves, thighs like boulders, and a head to match, broad and

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thick-browed. His massive chest and limbs bore the bloody scars from taking on two robo-guards barehanded. Not a pretty picture. He growled at her and waved the rock. This Neanderthal wanted nothing to do with her—and "Man the Wise" was out to kill her.

Digging through her survival kit, she found a meat stick. Taking a bite, she stepped forward, holding out the rest for him. "Here. You have to be hungry."

This time she used the surface dialect—a combination of hoots, clicks, grunts, and glottal stops that few non-Neanderthals could twist their tongues around. But she had a universal translator in her memory chip, part of her diplomatic equipment. He stared hard at her, plainly shocked that she could talk. Her sensors showed the hike in his breathing and heart rate. Spreading her hands palms up, showing she had no weapon, Diana nodded at the rock. "I hope you do not mean to use that." (What she really said was, "Me-pray-you-no-rock-hit-me.")

"Is death for you here," he reminded her.

Too true. Under the Surface Agreements, offworlders had no right to be on Ares, and the locals took those agreements seriously, having at various times been enslaved, lied to, killed like vermin, swindled, and hunted for sport.

"I did not mean to come here," she explained. The shuttle was supposed to take her to an aerostat. "And I saved your life." You silly savage!

He stared at her, torn between whatever good she might have done him, and his civic duty to beat her head in. "I was taken from my people," he told her, "tossed into the sky, then thrown down from a great height."

All true, according to her biosensors—he had small reason to lie. "I had nothing to do with that," she protested. Not much at least.

"So you say." He had to be at least half human, but with enough Neanderthal genes not to trust a *Homo Sapiens*. Trained to see the other side's point of view, Diana knew he had little to gain by believing her. Both she and D'Montjoy were offworlders. Why should this savage want to get dragged deeper into their quarrel? He certainly had not profited from it so far.

Desperate to establish credibility, she took another bite of the meat stick. "Not bad, you should try it." What a come-down! Negotiating for her life, and the best she could offer was synthetic jerky.

Having marched all day on an empty stomach, his hunger overcame caution. Without setting down the rock, he reached out and took the meat stick, sniffed suspiciously, then crammed it into his oversized maw.

"There's more." She held out the survival kit, feeling absurdly overdressed in her pinstripes and green diplomat's jacket—like a fashionable maître d' serving jerky in a dry wash.

The greedy lout finished off her meat sticks, then took a long drink from the kit canteen. Diana studied her guest. In thirty lifetimes, you see the same faces again and again. Alec's latest biosculpt was the spitting image of a long dead lover on Pisicium III. Guy D'Montjoy reminded her of a spice smuggler she'd once dealt with in the Far Eridani. But this barbarian's blunt mix of Thal and human was something new. Brutal and misshapen, perhaps—but not your usual contraceptive mishap. She pointed to herself, saying, "Diana."

He gave a disinterested grunt, turned abruptly, and headed back up the draw without even a hoot good-bye. Cheeky bastard.

Diana set out after him. Surface barbarians were wildly capricious savages, capable of guiltless cruelty and incredible kindness—as the mood moved them. But like it or not, they had problems in common. Guy D'Montjoy had tried to pin her murder on him, to create an excuse to intervene on

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the surface. Having missed once, Baron Guy would be in a frenzy to do it *right* the next time. Which meant that neither of them were safe.

By nightfall, they had crossed the rock spine at the top of the ridge. It rarely got dark on Ares. Nights were cold and clear, blazing with fluorescent nebulae, multiple moons, and giant young stars. Beyond the ridge line, the brightest shards of Dawn Cluster shone down on black sea bottom. Her savage found a sheltering overhang, curled up, and closed his eyes. Sensors picked up rhythmic sleep patterns. Exhausted beyond reason, Diana did her best to imitate him. Downing a full meal tablet and a pair of fruit bars, she drank from the near empty canteen, saving a swallow for the morning.

An ultralight swept by overhead, scanning the area in infrared. It had no chance of spotting her through the rock overhang. By dawn, her "farthest out" circle would cover thousands of square kilometers, making her virtually unfindable so long as she kept communications silence.

Her survival kit contained a thermal sleeping bag with a combination satellite compass and radar beacon clipped to it—not so useful when you mean to stay lost. Crawling into the thermal bag, she told her medikit to put her to sleep, blacking out before her head hit her rolled up jacket. Her many problems would have to wait until morning.

She woke with someone shaking her. "Get up," grunted the barbarian, a dark blotch against the colorful night sky. She obeyed, wriggling out of the bag, wondering why he was treating her as something other than a nuisance.

Eris, the largest moon, was up—making it nearly as bright as day. Three black shapes were descending the spine toward them. They were Thals, adult males, wearing breechcloths and leather breastplates, with broadswords slung across their backs—and not a drop of *Homo Sapiens* blood among them. They had their black hair tied in elaborate topknots. She told her medikit to wake her all the way.

Her barbarian tapped his chest, saying, "Chee-putk." It sounded like a clan name. He pointed to the intruders, spitting out three syllables, "Ka-tsohp-tu." Clearly not his folks.

Greeting him with a grunt and hoot, the trio spread out as they came in, giving their swords room to swing. "Who are your people?" they asked.

He made a clan sign. "Chee-putk."

They made signs of their own. "Ka-tsoph-tu." With formalities exchanged, the top-knotted trio turned to her. "Who is the flat-faced female?"

"She is no one. She fell out of the sky."

The trio looked her over. "Is she yours?"

"No. No one owns her."

"Who are her people?"

"She has none." He said it with flat finality, and could as easily have said she was dead. Which is how the Ka-tsoph-tu took it. Reaching over their shoulders, they drew their swords, asking, "Does she talk?"

Her barbarian shook his head. "Too much sometimes."

Diana stood motionless, trying to look unconcerned. One of the newcomers signed to her, saying, "Come here, Flat-face." He said it coldly, without a hint of malice, making it all the more frightening. Razor-bright edges on their hand-forged longswords shone in the moonlight. She had nothing to use as a weapon. Any one of them outmassed her more than two-to-one—and they were not going to change their minds if she offered them full meal tabs or fruit bars.

"Come here," they insisted. "What does she call herself?"

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"Di-hanah." The Chee-putk stood aside, taking no part.

"Dee-hana," they called. "Come here."

Fat chance. She slid her feet into *migi gamae,* a martial arts stance taught by the Peace Corps. The nearest brute raised his blade, shining blue in reflected nebula light. With a satisfied grunt, he brought it down, expecting her to stand there like Anne Boleyn waiting for the blow.

Instead, she stepped into the attack, seizing his sword hilt and adding her weight to his. Hips pivoting, arms extended, she completed the circle her attacker had begun, "helping" him cartwheel into the bank behind her. His headlong momentum tore the sword from his hand—to have hung on would have broken his wrist. That was aikido, *Shiho nage,* immobilization number 6. *Tenkan* variation.

None of the Thals recognized it. They stood dumbfounded. To untrained eyes it seemed that their companion had stumbled in his eagerness, handing Diana his sword as he went tail over topknot. The two remaining Ka-tsoph-tu exchanged puzzled looks. Taking a couple of suspicious steps forward, they swung at her from either side.

She had no hope of taking them both on with a sword—Peace Corps training was in unarmed combat. Fortunately, Diana XII had been a free-fall gymnast. Springing forward into a double flip, she told Diana XII to take over. Her long dead self said not to worry. ("Leave them to me.") Swords lashed empty air as the low-g flip carried her right over the Thals' heads.

Looking wildly about, one of the Ka-tsoph-tu caught sight of her coming down behind them. "Stop jumping!" he shouted, spinning about. "Hold *still,* Dee-hana!" his companion demanded, taking a backhanded slash at her.

They might as well have told the moons to stop hurtling. She could not have held still if she wanted to. Always a show-off, Diana XII had been called up to give a tumbling exhibition, and could not bear to disappoint. Surface-normal on Ares was not free-fall, but one-third g just served to keep her from flying away. Sword in hand, Diana did a dazzling routine of back flips and ballet leaps—while the two Thals slashed futilely away, yelling, "Come down, Dee-hana! Stop jumping!,"

If Diana XII had not been so good, she might have gotten away. Instead of bounding off, she stayed just out of their reach, confident they could not touch her. As she soared over their topknots a rock caught her alongside the head.

Her medikit screamed, "CONCUSSION." By then, she had already blacked out in midair. A jolt of stimulants woke her just before she hit—and she came down hard, twisting her ankle, wrenching a wrist, and banging her head again. Somehow she stupidly hung onto the sword. The first Ka-tsoph-tu, the one she had disarmed, had picked up a rock and brought her down. "Stone her!" he shouted. Instantly the other two brutes set down their swords and reached for rocks.

Diana struggled upright, supporting herself with the sword, too weak to save herself, wishing she could vomit. A thrown stone grazed her hip, drawing blood. She raised her free hand in a hopeless attempt to ward off the attack. She was about to die—again. This time by homicidal violence. Under a hail of stones from inhuman savages whose name sounded like a wet spit.

Her barbarian had been making no move to interfere. But as soon as the swords were set down, he scooped a blade off the ground, giving its owner a tremendous kick, sending him sprawling into a companion. The remaining Ka-tsoph-tu dropped his rock and grabbed his sword. The savage slashed

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him across the neck, sending blood spraying into the night. The sword dropped and the Chee-putk stepped on it. Suddenly the Ka-tsoph-tu were disarmed.

Groggy with shock, Diana watched the Ka-tsoph-tu pick themselves up, remonstrating loudly. The Chee-putk was unmoved. Snagging the blade from beneath his foot, he stared levelly at them, a sword in each hand. Seeing that he wouldn't listen to reason, they backed away over the ridge, half-carrying the one with the neck wound, which was still bleeding busily.

The Chee-putk turned to her. "Come."

"What? Come where?" Still thoroughly shaken, she said it in Universal.

He grabbed her hand, the one holding the sword, insisting, "Come with me." In no shape to resist, she let him haul her off the rocky ridge, out onto the dead sea bottom. She could barely see the dark green vegetation at her feet, but the sky above blazed with light. Eris was up and full, along with several moonlets. Great red-blue fingers of cosmic gas and dust stretched out behind them, lit from within by newborn stars.

Finally, she could go no further. Doubling up, Diana told him to stop, remembering to use surface dialect this time. He ignored her. Dropping the sword, she dug in her heels. "Stop! I will not go on."

He turned to stare. "Why?"

"I have to vomit." Dropping to her knees, she did it, tossing up half a meat stick, a couple of fruit bars, and the full meal tab. With baby suns blazing overhead, and the barbarian holding her hand. If the brave taste of death but once, then Diana had to be a coward, having tasted death dozens of times—and always finding it nauseous. Especially when dying involved blows to the head.

Keeping hold of her hand, he looked about. "This is far enough. If they come, I will see them."

Still on her knees, Diana began to cry big wracking sobs. This was too much. She could not go on alone. Cut off from the universe. Every hand raised against her. Not daring to call for help for fear her enemies would hear. The savage knelt down beside her, asking, "Why are you crying?"

She stared dumbly up at him. She had been force-marched into the middle of nowhere, awakened in the night and made to jump for her life. And her medikit kept claiming she had a concussion. How do you put that in hoots and clicks?

He lifted her up gently, carrying her over to a low wash, putting her down under the cutbank—still crying. Driving his twin swords into the sand, he sat down beside her and began undoing her pinstriped body-suit. The fastenings were strange to him, and he ended up tearing it at the waist and down one leg.

That stopped her crying. "What are you doing?" Silly question. What he was doing was pretty plain.

He stopped peeling off her body-suit and stared at her. His huge hand felt vaguely comforting against her thigh. He outmassed her handily, and in her present state could have about anything he wanted—but he was not forcing her. Behind blunt misshapen features, sensors showed him to be concerned and curious. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Did you bang your baby-maker in the fall?"

She wiped tears from her eyes. "That is a nice way of putting it." He looked quizzical. "Baby-maker," she explained. "It beats twat or pussy." She had to use Universal, since she did not know the Thal equivalents. Maybe they didn't have derogatory terms for intimate female anatomy.

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"Did you hurt it?" Biosensors registered real concern. Human genes or just horny?

"No." That was one part she had not banged. She struggled to explain that, though physically possible, sex was out of the question. He ought not to take it personally—she actually felt complimented. But so far, this had been a celibate incarnation. "I have not done this. . . ."

Concern turned to amazement, "You have never made babies?"

Diana smiled. What about her made that so unbelievable? "Not recently." Not in this life. Never with a Thal.

His big hand massaged her inner thigh, a firm soothing motion that sent cool shivers down her spine. "You will like it."

"Really?" She remained unconvinced, though it felt good to know someone on Ares wanted her alive, not dead.

"It will stop your tears. You were good to me. You gave food. You saved my life."

She lifted an eyebrow. "So you thought you would throw me a fuck to cheer me up?"

"Oh no," he registered shock. "I would not throw you. You are weak, and would break. I mean to . . ."

"I know what you mean," she laughed at his confusion. "I am just not in shape to . . ."

He shook his head. "Yes. You *are* flat-faced and scrawny—but in the dark, that is not so bad." (Sensors showed that he did find her uncommonly ugly.) "And you can talk," he added. "I never make babies with a she I cannot talk to."

Sound policy. She again felt the urge to vomit. This time, he held her while she threw up, one hand on her stomach, the other keeping her hair out of the way. When she was done wiping drool off her chin, she felt better, way better. Lighter, happier, more in control, with her head clear and her stomach empty—nothing in life is more underrated than a good puke.

"You have soft fine hair," he told her, searching for something to compliment. He ran fingers through it, stopping at the nape of her neck. His touch took the tension out of her shoulders, reminding her how much she craved human contact. Right now she desperately needed someone to care for her. To be on her side—for whatever reason.

Reaching out, she touched his massive chest, marveling at its size and strength. Her fingers traced the line of his chin—way too big to be pure Neanderthal. Great hairy heroes had their uses, and for a wild ignorant savage, this one acted uncommonly considerate. "Maybe just this once," she sighed. He too had saved her life.

Taking that as agreement, her savage went briskly to work. Diana showed him how to undo the front of her body-suit—telling her medikit to take away her pain, and put her more in the mood. Magically her aches and pains vanished, replaced by warm excitement as he climbed atop her, supporting his weight on his arms to keep from crushing her. Suddenly she remembered something important, "Wait. Hold on a micromoment . . ."

He stopped, stiff and hard against her hip. "You are hurting?"

"No." Her medikit had seen to that. "But you must tell me your name." It was a point of honor over thirty lifetimes that she never slept with a man without at least knowing his name.

"Chee-putk-wha." Sensors said it was the truth.

"Thanks," she murmured. Clinging to his broad chest, she stared up at the

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stars she had come from, enjoying the powerful way he heaved inside her. Her first man in this lifetime. Who would have guessed? Certainly not her. Afterward, she lay secure and happy, listening to his deep breathing. He was right. She did feel better. Immensely so. And tomorrow she would tackle the woes of his misbegotten world.

Fallen City

Ares looked much better by morning light. Diana awoke alone under the cutbank on the ancient sea bed, tucked into her thermal bag. Her head rested on the green embassy jacket. Within easy reach lay the hand-forged sword she had taken from the first Ka-tsoph-tu that tried to spit her. Alongside sat her survival kit. She reached out and hefted the canteen. It had been refilled. Unbelievable. He must have gotten up, found her things, fetched water, and put her in the thermal bag. All without waking her. First rate butlering from the same savage who a dozen hours before tried to drive her away with a rock.

Homo Neanderthals. You never knew what they would do next. One minute he was calmly watching her being murdered. The next, he was saving her life, gathering her things, seeing her warm and cared for, and reintroducing her to sex. And now he was gone, without a goodbye. But this absence would be temporary. Neanderthal or not, he was very much a man—after last night, he would be back.

She got out of her bag and climbed atop the cutbank, cautiously surveying the sky. The heavens were empty. The cloud front had moved on, taking the floating city with it. No ultralights or semi-rigids prowled above her. Off to the east, a gyre of vultures circled over the green sea bottom. Just past sunup, and already something had died. Not a promising sign.

Feeling about, she tried to see how much she had healed during the night. She still had a wicked lump on her head, and big ugly bruises on her hip and ankle. She was not totally ready to tackle the planet. Otherwise, she felt wonderful. She took a moment to replay parts of last night in her head. Amazing. Absolutely scandalous. And not just the sex. She had never had such a slam-bang planetfall. Not one she walked away from. She thanked the cosmos for giving her a second chance.

Fishing through the survival pack, she found a fruit bar, hoping she could keep it down. At the same time, she turned up her transceiver, going carefully through the local channels. Not much happening on the comnet. The usual traffic passed between the aerostats, along with relays off the Beanstalk. None of it concerned her. Closer to home, a second semi-rigid had joined the search, but by now they were looking far to the south and west. There was way too much area to cover.

A dozen dire wolves drifted into view, shaggy evil-eyed brutes with big bone-crushing jaws. They moved silently, like windblown smoke, not yapping, or darting back and forth like a dog pack. Putting down her fruit bar, she reached for the hand-forged longsword. But *Canis dirus* merely looked her over, yawned, then settled down to rest.

Suddenly a call came through, straight from Beanstalk Station, in the clear and aimed at her. The 3V showed Alec in his version of full diplomatic regalia—tight pinstriped pants, silver-braided tunic, and a showy green dolman jacket thrown over his shoulder like a cape. He was having a heated

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face-to-face with Messalina D'Eyrie, D'Montjoy's steel-haired maternal grandmother, who was wearing the traditional jeweled tiara and fur robes of a clan matriarch. The fur came from big striped-and-spotted beasts of prey, making Messalina look suitably barbaric.

Refereeing the encounter was the Dawn Systems ambassador, in plain embassy pinstripes. But he was the man with the power, able to slap an arms embargo on the losing side. And those with the most to lose—surface barbarians like Chee-putk-wha and the Ka-tsoph-tu—were not even represented. Diana doubted they even knew about the meeting. Or would care much if they did.

Both sides exchanged prepared positions. Messalina repeated her faction's claim to the surface. The aerostats were never intended to be permanent. As terraforming progressed, the transition ecology on the ancient sea bottoms was meant to give way to advanced agricultural settlement fed by the canal net. "And this latest attack on an Orion Lines shuttle *and* a Peace Corps representative shows that the surface barbarians do not intend to be bound by any agreements whatever!"

Alec scoffed at the so-called "attack." Saying that whatever the original "intentions" had once been, the surface was now inhabited by the descendants of the very beings who had carried out much of the terraforming. Retrobred Neanderthals and SuperChimps had dug the canal net and tended herds spread over the dead sea bottoms. "If they have subsequently set up a society of their own, so be it. Genocide is *not* an acceptable fix for your problems. The Peace Corps stands by the Surface Agreements, and accuses Guy D'Montjoy of terrorism, kidnapping, misprision, and attempted murder."

Her aide-de-camp wasn't pulling punches. But he had no proof. All Alec could offer was her 3V signal from the falling command couch—electronic evidence, easily forged and notoriously worthless. Messalina D'Eyrie demanded Diana's testimony—in person. The Dawn Systems ambassador agreed.

Diana wished she could jump right in, shouting, "Here I am, you sanctimonious bastards! I'll give you the truth!" It took discipline to just sit and listen. But thirty lifetimes in diplomatic service taught you something about negotiations. There were reasons why this was all coming through "in the clear." An official report from Marta would be scrambled—super-encrypted for her eyes only. This public 3V drama was meant to tempt her into the open, to get her to tip her hand.

Voice inflection and pupil dilation indicated that neither D'Eyrie nor the Dawn Systems ambassador were flat out lying—they were not personally in on D'Montjoy's schemes. Carefully keeping their own hands clean. But by applying strict rules of evidence, they were giving D'Montjoy an easy out. If something swift and permanent happened to Diana, Baron Guy was off the hook. And you could bet the good baron was intently watching the whole charade, hoping to see her wade in, giving away her location. By the time anyone came to collect her "personal" testimony, the only thing left to talk to would be a burnt patch on the dead sea bottom.

A couple of saber-tooths appeared, taking her attention away from the debate in orbit. The dire wolves jumped up, staring at the intruders. More saber-tooths arrived, big broad-shouldered cat-like carnivores, with sleek tawny bodies, long curved canines, and tiny bobbed tails. Like short-tailed lionesses with fearsome overbites. A few toothy snarls, and the dire wolves trotted off, looking for an unclaimed patch of sea bottom.

Settling down where the wolves had been, the pride gave Diana an occa-

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sional glance. The shape of their teeth made it plain that humans were not their normal diet. Such super canines were designed for something bigger, with a tough hide to pierce. But Diana might do for a snack. Again she picked up the sword.

One of the saber-tooths seemed attracted by the movement. The pseudo-cat stared steadily at her, then rose, stretched, and came padding over. Diana stood up, gripping the sword with both hands, seeing the saber-tooth's whole demeanor change. The tawny beast flattened into a stalking crouch, ears pinned back, eyes getting that glazed stare of a hunter intent on its prey. Diana fixed her gaze on the oncoming carnivore, trying her damnedest not to look like something to be eaten. The entire pride now stared her way. Out the corner of her eye, she saw several more pseudo-cats getting up.

Suddenly the saber-tooth froze, staring intently. The rest of the pride rose to its feet, giving off warning snarls. Way more attention than Diana thought she warranted. She cursed the unwanted confrontation, but dared not back down. If she turned and ran, they would be on her before she got a dozen steps.

Snarls subsided. Wary now, the approaching pseudo-cat began to back off. That was more like it. Diana prided herself on a successful bit of armed diplomacy. A small show of force had defused a dangerous situation—eliminating the need to fight. A neat little lesson for everyone.

In the midst of self-congratulation, she heard a soft rhythmic scraping from somewhere over her shoulder. The out-of-sight sound slowly got more distinct. She recognized heavy clawed footfalls, coming closer. Something big was behind her, bigger than a saber-tooth, but she dared not turn to look.

Damn this bloody planet! The transitional eco-system contained far too many toothy creatures. She knew big carnivores were a natural check on the huge herbivores, but *this* was absurd! What could turn back a pride of saber-tooths?

As the saber-tooths backed further away, the heavy scraping came to a halt directly behind her. Hands locked on the long sword, she slowly turned her head to look.

Chee-putk-wha stared down at her, sitting cool as be damned atop a huge moropus, a tremendous retrobred beast, half-rhino, half-horse, with a thick horny hide and great clawed feet. A second moropus waited behind the barbarian at the end of a crude hemp line. They had come up slowly, their footfalls softened by vegetation until they were nearly on top of her. He gave a couple of hoot-clicks, and a grunt that meant, "Stop annoying the Long Teeth. We ride."

Translation, quit playing with the retrobred fauna, we've got things to do. Neanderthal or not, Chee-putk-wha had that frustrating male ability to trivialize whatever you were doing—no matter how vital it was. Keeping an eye on the pseudo-cats, she collected her things, asking, "Where did you get the moropuses?"

The savage nodded over his shoulder, "Chee-putk." Tapping his chest he added, "Chee-putk-wha," acting as if that were sufficient explanation.

"Right," she pointed at herself, and then at him. "Me Diana. You Chee-putk-wha. That does not explain the moropuses."

He must have thought it did, because he reached down and helped her up behind him. She straddled the back of his moropus, hands on his hips, knees tucked against his thighs—like the fair Ellen behind Lord Lochinvar. She asked, "Where are we going?"

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"Chee-putk."

Apparently the universal answer. Luckily, she was accustomed to unspoken agreements. He had gotten her things, fetched her water, and somehow found these mounts. That—plus making love—said that he wanted her around. They set off together over the ancient sea bottom, with Chee-putk-wha whistling happily, as though he owned the planet.

After backtracking to confuse the trail, Chee-putk-wha followed a worn game path, mingling with the grazing herds to further hide his track. Twice, he had them dismount and walk in the shadow of his moropus. Both times, Diana spotted a spark low on the horizon, an airship or ultralight out searching for her. Somehow he seemed to sense pursuit well before it was close enough to spot them. Once, she spied a thread of smoke rising from a far-off hill. The column dissolved into discrete puffs, then turned back into a thin thread. Smoke signals? Someone keeping watch on the watchers above? Damned smart for sub-humans.

In the sweltering noontime, they stopped to rest in the shade of a wait-a-bit thorn brush, letting the moropuses graze. Chee-putk-wha was slowly losing the Orion Lines uniform. The legs had split along the seams, and the tunic was reduced to the collar and a single sleeve. She must be a sight herself, in her torn sweat-stained body suit. He did not seem to mind, asking, "Do you remember last night?"

A roundabout of way of finding out if she was in the mood? "I never forget anything," she confessed. "One of my most difficult traits."

The savage stared hard at her.

"No kidding, ask me what I was doing a thousand years ago today. It was a Tuesday. I was waiting to change ships at a habitat station called Hot Spot, in the Rigel system." She had to say it in Universal—his hoots and clicks did not cover near enough space-time—making it hard to tell how much he took in.

He merely asked, "Did you like what we did?"

"Yes, indeed. Really smashing! You're the best," she assured him. In *this* life, anyway.

"Have you ever made babies?"

"Oh, yes. Lots and lots of them. I am a great-great-great-grandmother many times over."

The surface barbarian nodded solemnly. "I have never made babies with a many-times grandmother before."

He still hadn't, though she did not say so. A contraceptive implant kept her from actually "making babies." Diana did not plan to add pregnancy to her problem file.

"Your hair is white. But your skin is not wrinkled."

She saw that he thought she had done it all in one lifetime. Diana explained that she was a clone. "I was raised from DNA taken from the first Diana many centuries ago. Whenever a Diana dies, a new baby is cloned. Each successive child is given an augmented memory covering her previous lives." Which was why she went around with dozens of past Dianas in her head.

A lot of her explanation was in Universal. He just gave her that *Homo-Sapiens*-are-crazy look, asking, "How can we be related?"

"Hardly seems possible," she admitted. Last night, he acted like they were plenty related, now sensors showed him only half convinced. "Mind you, I'm not complaining—but being a clone wasn't my idea, not by half." No one asked her if she wanted to be a living institution—a thirtieth-generation copy

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of an ancient original. "Imagine growing up with a head full of adult memories. I was the only girl in my Peace Scouts troop who knew what it felt like to have an orgasm. Or a baby." Or to die.

Chee-putk-wha stared at her, saying nothing. Diana let it drop. To a half-Thal savage it must all sound like some high-tech fairy tale.

When the Twin Suns had sunk somewhat, they mounted up, leaving the shade of the thorn bush, setting out again into the hot afternoon. As they rode, she got more of his story in grunts and clicks. He said he had been waylaid by "sky people"—then stunned, stuffed into the Orion Lines uniform, and strapped into the sabotaged shuttle for a death ride. No wonder his first impulse had been to get away from her—putting the whole bad business behind him.

But that night, under the bright Dawn Cluster sky, he still wanted her strange pale thin body—no matter how impossibly old her recycled soul might be.

On the second morning, she sighted the green line of a canal in the distance, but Chee-putk-wha turned further south to avoid it, plainly preferring the trackless wastes. The third day found them edging through wild uplands inhabited by bighorn sheep and enormous cave lions. On the fourth day, descending from a fold of hills, Diana saw a fallen city ahead, shattered into silver pieces on the dead sea bottom.

Great cavernous gas cells were crushed flat by the weight of the fallen city. The central mooring mast lay toppled onto the plain, pointing toward them, broken in several places. Diana spotted an intact geo-dome, and numerous apartment blocks, some still attached to one another, others tossed by the impact out onto the sea bottom. Herds of moropuses and big-horned bison ringed the wreck, grazing amid campfire haze.

Thals on moropus-back charged forth from the ruins, shouting and waving four-meter-long lances, looking gorgeously barbaric in paint and leather. Long black hair spilled over their naked shoulders. Massive limbs, broad faces, and bulging chests were covered with clan markings and personal insignia—red bull's horns, yellow hail-spots, and white lighting flashes. Reining in before Chee-putk-wha, they dipped their lances. He acknowledged their deference by touching his brow and striking his chest, making the mob of riders whoop and hoot even louder. Women and infants spilled out of the fallen city to join in the greeting. Chee-putk-wha waved his hand at the happy throng, saying, "Chee-putk." Then he tapped his chest. "Chee-putk-wha!"

Diana smiled. "So 'wha' means leader?" She added the syllable to her mental dictionary. He was not just any Chee-putk; he was The Chee-putk. A chieftain. She should have known.

He whistled a young female out of the crowd. She was pure Thal with heavy brow ridges, elaborately kinked hair, and an even disposition, wearing nothing but a breechcloth, facial tattoos, and red-ocher body paint. Her nipples were outlined in yellow. Calling herself So-ja-hee, she motioned for Diana to follow her. Together they entered the fallen city.

Hide tents sewn together with frayed strands of circuitry lined the buckled slidewalks. Thal heads poked from the entrance flaps. Tame boars and prairie hens nosed though flies and garbage. So-ja-hee chose a plump prairie hen, casually wrung its neck, then plucked the dead bird as they walked. She led Diana to what had been a luxury suite before the crash, sited near the city apex. Sunlight shone through huge rents in ultralight material stained with cook smoke. Females and children filled the sunken living area below, smelling of smoke and sweat.

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So-ja-hee squatted on sky-blue synthetic carpet next to the central firepit to finish gutting the hen. As soon as Diana sat down, the children were on her, laughing, poking, feeling her strange clothes, pulling at her pale hair. Some of these half-grown Thals outweighed her, and their playful thumps and whacks hurt. But their mothers acted supremely indifferent. Fighting off the children, Diana asked what she had done to offend.

Her companion laughed. "Elder wives. Chee-putk-wha gets a new mate and they want her like me, young and hardworking. You are a weak skinny sky-person, needing to be fed. Chee-putk-wha thinks with his crotch." She tapped her head and pointed between her legs. "Who knows what he will do?"

Diana grinned in agreement. "Males. My favorite mammals."

So-ja-hee buried the gutted hen under the coals to bake, then shooed the children away and started to preen Diana, looking for nits in her hair. Clearly she liked having a hapless newcomer under her, making her no longer the junior-most member of the harem. Finding a fat louse amid the blonde strands, she popped it in her mouth. Diana let her harem-mate have all the appetizers she could catch. Happy to have them out of her hair.

As she sat having her nits picked, a scrambled call came in from Marta saying they had laid hands on the orbital yacht, an oxy-hydrogen scramjet with auxiliary turbofans. Alec stood ready to pick her up the moment he got the call. Smashing news. The best she had gotten since her unplanned planetfall. She had only to slip through a coded signal and she was home free.

But she had gone through hell to get where she was—leave now and there was no coming back. Through no fault of her own, she had broken the dirtside taboo. She meant to make the most of that mishap. Back in orbit, she faced diplomatic deadlock. At best, she might get Baron Guy slapped with an arms embargo. But his personal arsenal must be more than a match for Chee-putk-wha's wooden lances and handforged swords. Somehow she had to involve these Thals in the peace talks. Hard enough to do from here, but utterly impossible from orbit.

Not that things were easy down on dirtside. Aside from So-ja-hee, only dogs and children took any notice of her, following her about, shouting and barking, greeting her with strange hoot clicks, and sniffing at her crotch. When she asked So-ja-hee what the unfamiliar hoot clicks meant, the young Thal made the signs for "Dead" and "Spirit."

"Dead spirit? Like a ghost? A dead person?"

So-ja-hee shook her head, the Thal way of saying, "It is so."

"Why?"

"Your hair and skin are pale, your eyes blue and empty. You are a sky-person. No sky-person can live here. You are dead."

Diana shook her head in wonder, which So-ja-hee took to mean she agreed. In a way, it was all too true. No one offplanet had heard a word from her since she hit the surface. To them, it must seem that Ares had swallowed her up.

Chee-putk-wha acted as distant as the other adults, hanging out with the males during the day, doing things females were barred from. Nights were devoted to showing his senior wives that he did not mean to neglect them now that he had a ghost wife from beyond the sky. When she finally got his attention, he showed no interest in off-planet negotiations. The Surface Agreements were fine as they stood. True, they called for her death—but she was already a ghost who had died dozens of times.

That day at dusk, she sat staring at the carnivorous landscape, disconso-

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lately watching the stars come out. Aside from being the neglected new wife of a Neanderthal nabob, she had not much to show for her ad hoc on-the-spot diplomacy. Maybe it was time to call Alec. Diana decided to sleep on it.

So-ja-hee dragged her out of bed at first light—jabbering in Thal. Sensors said the young Neanderthal was terrified. Something ghastly had happened, but neither had the words to say what. Diana just had time to snatch her jacket and medikit before being tossed out the door by her brawny roommate.

Thrown into chaos, she scrambled to escape being trampled by Thals streaming down the slidewalks headed for the herds on the dead sea bottom. Diana looked up. Dawnlight shone on the belly of a semi-rigid. The airship had snuck up on the Thals from out of the terminator, dodging their mysterious warning system. Ultralights tumbled out of the hangar doors.

So-ja-hee seized her arm, hauling her into the stampede for the sea bottom. As she ran, incendiary shells slammed into the stricken city, shredding skin tents and tearing up slidewalks. Fires broke out. Splinters sang through the air, accompanied by bits of blood and bone. When they reached the herds, the young Thal threw a halter over the nearest moropus. Scooping up a frightened child, So-ja-hee leaped aboard, hauling Diana up behind her. The city had become a blazing pyre—frying those who had not gotten out.

Ultralights swooped out of the predawn sky, firing on the fugitives. Horrified, Diana could only cling to the moropus's rump, praying none of the shells hit home. Over the comlink, she heard spotters aboard the semi-rigid calling out targets to the ultralights, calmly coordinating the massacre.

Their moropus bolted up a dry wash into the hills. Over her shoulder, Diana saw a trail of dead Thals and slaughtered livestock stretching across the sea bottom all the way back to the burning city. Hysterical Thals and their panicked animals scattered into hiding places in the rocks and canyons. Above them, ultralights slashed back and forth, recoilless cannons flashing, cutting them down as they ran.

Reining in, So-ja-hee tumbled to the ground, still clutching the child. Diana joined her, crouching under an overhang, tempted to call for a pick-up. A scrambled signal would bring Alec screeching down from orbit. No ultralight could hope to stand in the way of a scramjet. But that would mean leaving these Thals to their fate—something she could not bear to do.

Instead she cowered under the overhang as the Twin Suns topped the hills behind her. Thals vanished into nooks and gullies, leaving the ultralights with no living targets. Silence descended. So-ja-hee held the child's nose to keep him from crying. Diana saw a wounded Thal crawl into the mouth of the draw and collapse under a thorn bush, bleeding quietly. The boomerang shadow of an ultralight passed ghost-like overhead.

She heard the semi-rigid sound recall. Ultralights turned back toward the dead sea bottom, swooping low over the bodies searching for wounded to finish off. Finally they tired of that, spiraling upward to rejoin the semi-rigid. Together they disappeared over the hills to the west.

Diana rose from her hiding place, nauseated by Montjoy's notion of peaceful negotiation—an old-time Neanderthal hunt. Plainly, he did not intend to share a single centimeter of the planet. No wonder Thals equated offworlders with death.

Keeping low, she scrambled down the draw to see to the Thal beneath the bush. One of Chee-putk-wha's senior wives, she must have been just behind them in the stampede—and not nearly so lucky. A cannon shell had caught her in the back, shattering her ribs and right shoulder blade. Only tremen-

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dous Neanderthal vitality kept her from dying of shock. Diana ordered up injections from the medikit, spraying on antiseptic and flesh sealant, doing her best to clean and bind the gaping wound.

Fortunately, Diana XV had med-evac training. Calling her up, Diana let the memories take over, going from body to body down the draw. Most were beyond help. At the mouth of the draw, she heard a groan out on the sea bottom, and saw a Thal boy struggle upright, bleeding horribly, his scalp laid open and bone showing. Hurrying over, she told him in clicks and grunts to hold still while she pried jagged bits of shrapnel from his exposed skull.

So-ja-hee hooted a warning. Diana turned and froze. Gliding down the draw with its engine out, an ultralight dropped toward her. She could see the grinning furry face of the pilot, and his great curving saber-teeth. The cannon in his hands swung toward her. Another nanosecond, and he would fire.

Mount Joy

"What a blazing idiot!" Diana saw death number thirty winging toward her. She was neatly suckered. Total communications silence, followed by the dawn attack and a noisy withdrawal to the west—it had all been a murderous ploy to draw her out. A single ultralight had hung back, hiding upsun, waiting to see who came to treat the wounded. The whole ghastly massacre had been aimed at flushing her out. And succeeded admirably.

Telling Diana XII to take over, she threw herself at the nearest cover, cartwheeling in the low gravity. But not nearly fast enough. From the air, even a trained gymnast in full flight moves in incredibly slow motion. A flick of an ultralight's rudder sprayed death over a hundred meter arc. Cannon shells zipped after her, exploding along the sea bottom.

And suddenly stopped. Huddled beside a boulder, she looked up to see the ultralight stagger in midair, then nose down out of control. Amazed and thankful, she watched the tiny aircraft struggle to right itself, just above the dead sea bottom. The port wing dipped, hitting the dirt. Thrown sideways, the ultralight ground-looped, careening across the sea bottom in slow mode, finally skidding to rest a few hundred meters away.

Diana heard hoots of applause. Looking up, she saw Chee-putk-wha standing atop a boulder above the draw, holding a crude hand catapult made of scrap steel and animal sinew. Deadly enough at close range to bring down an ultralight.

Thals poured out of the rocks waving swords and lances, to take out their anger on the downed aircraft. Diana sprang upright. Bounding over the sea bottom, she covered the half-klick between her and the wreck in a series of huge leaps, flying over the heads of surprised Thals.

Getting there first, she saw the pilot pinned beneath the ultralight, his tawny fur showing through gaps in the wreckage. Her internal sensors said he was unconscious, but alive. She spun about to face the oncoming Neanderthals.

The nearest had his lance out. Easing into *migi gamae,* she grabbed the lance with both hands, using the Thal's momentum to swing him through immobilization no. 6, snapping the lance point off against the ground and flipping the surprised savage onto his back. Stepping forward, she swung the broken-off lance through several passes from the *jo kata,* the formal floor exercise with the stave, while hooting in Thal, "Stop. Stay away."

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Astonished Neanderthals pulled up short. Taken aback, they formed a circle just out of the reach of the whirling staff. More arrived, pressing on the circle. Several tried to stab past her, but she batted their lances aside, grunting and clicking, "No. Do not touch. Not him. Not his big metal bird."

Thals parted. Chee-putk-wha appeared, still holding his sinew and steel catapult. "What you doing?" he hooted.

She pointed at the pilot, "That man is a prisoner."

Chee-putk-wha stared blankly at her. "Piss-on-her?" She had used Universal, there being no Neanderthal for POW.

"Yes," she shook her head sharply. "The man must not be killed."

"He is not a man," Chee-putk-wha pointed out, indicating the pilot's tawny fur and fanged head.

"No matter. He must not be harmed."

The Chee-putk remained unconvinced. "Why?"

"You want these attacks stopped?"

He snorted, "Stopped?"

"Yes, stopped."

Chee-putk-wha stared hard her. "How?"

"I'll show you. Just take him into the hills alive."

"Can we kill him later? After the attacks stop."

"Just do it," Diana demanded.

Sensors showed him only half-convinced, but he turned to his Thals, addressing them in curt grunts and clicks. Alive did not mean comfortable. They dragged the pilot from the wreckage, tying his wrists and ankles to a pair of lances.

Diana went over him with her medikit, binding broken ribs and ordering up injections. He was a mammal, a SuperCat, *Homo Smilodon,* a bioengineered intelligent sub-species—better than half human. Tawny fur covered his human limbs and torso, and his small bobbed tail. His hairy cat-like face had little tufted ears and saber-tooth fangs. Bred centuries ago from human and big cat DNA, SuperCats were used throughout Human Space whenever intimidation and inhuman ferocity were called for. This one had a silver comlink clipped to one hairy ear.

Her injections brought him around. Amber cat's eyes flicked open, staring past her at the ring of Thals—knowing he had nothing to fear from her, and everything to fear from them. Diana had seen a male Thal wearing a SuperCat skin. Unclipping his comlink, she straightened up, satisfied that the bioconstruct would survive being lugged about. Thals seized the lances, jerking them up to shoulder level, so *Homo Smilodon* hung by his bound limbs. Her would-be assassin fainted from the shock. She turned to Chee-putk-wha, pointing at the ultralight. "Hide this."

"Hide it?"

"Yes," she insisted. "We will need it."

He gave more orders. Thals dragged the ultralight across the dead sea bottom to where the ground began to rise. There they covered it with hides, heaping dirt on top. Diana went back to the wounded—glad she had another self trained to stomach such grim grisly business. She far preferred peacekeeping to cleaning up after a fight. By the time Diana XV finished, the dead Thals had been hauled away as well, leaving naught behind but slaughtered livestock and the burnt, blackened city.

Chee-putk-wha had the SuperCat taken to a torch-lit cave in the hills, a deep volcanic fissure Thals used to bury their dead. Funerals were in full

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swing. Thals moaned and wailed, burning sweet grass and sprinkling yellow-red ocher on their dead. The SuperCat sat tied in the back of the cave, awake and watching. She knelt in the darkness next to him. "Do you know who I am?"

Glowing cat's eyes looked her over—SuperCats saw splendidly in the dark. "You are the female I was to kill." They also had human voice boxes and speech centers, and no native language except Universal.

"Instead, I ended up saving your skin." Literally.

"Life has its little ironies," observed the SuperCat.

"Just so," Diana agreed. "To add to that irony, your only hope of surviving is to cooperate with me."

"Really?"

"Refuse, and I turn you over to the Thals—who will skin you alive, leaving what's left to the ants."

"Hardly civilized," he snarled.

"Not everyone has bombs and bioconstructs to do their dirty work for them." She could not use violence—except in self-defense—but diplomatic protocol allowed her to stand by and see it done.

The man-beast's eyes stared into hers. "How can I know you will keep your word?"

Diana smiled. "You were bred to kill, I was bred to be a peacemaker—that is your sole chance."

"I would be a fool not to take it," he purred.

"That's the spirit. Welcome to the cause of peace."

Leaving her new recruit bound in the back of the cave listening to Thal funerals—for the good of his saber-toothed soul—she found Chee-putk-wha sitting on a boulder staring into the deep blue sky. He had long ago shed the tattered Orion Lines uniform; now he looked a total mess, with his hair shorn and great self-inflicted gashes on his limbs to show his grief. The Chee-putk had dead to mourn, and the Chee-putk-wha led by example. Diana explained how she meant to use the SuperCat and the ultralight to stop the attacks from above—relying heavily on offplanet concepts and odd bits of Universal. But by now they understood each other. Or so she hoped. When she finished, he stared hard at her, saying, "You are strange."

"So everyone says." Being a living institution set you apart, even among so-called humans.

"Very strange."

"Too bad. Because you have to trust me on this."

"Trust you?" That seemed the most alien concept yet.

She shook her head. "Scary, isn't it?" Sheer lunacy, given the crashing disaster she had been so far—but what choice did he have?

"I wanted none of this," he reminded her. "When they took me beyond the sky, I thought I was dead. . . ."

"But you did not die."

Chee-putk-wha said that was so.

"And I am what you ended up with."

He shook his head in agreement. He had tried to chase her away with threats and rocks. When that did not work, he saved her life, made love to her, and took her home to his harem. But now, like it or not, he had to do what she wanted.

With Thals to do the heavy lifting, Diana XX repaired the crashed ultralight, leaving out unnecessary parts like the machine cannon, ammunition

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clips, and bomb racks. She used the SuperCat's comlink to record scrambled instructions for Marta and Alec, then had Chee-putk-wha give the comlink to a Thal, telling him to take it far, far away, trigger the signal, and then run—sending her pursuers galloping off in the wrong direction.

Then they set out. Chee-putk-wha headed a war party on moropus-back, looking suitably barbaric in battle leather trimmed with cheetah fur, armed with sword, lance, and hand catapult. Advance scouts and flankers kept watch on the skies, sending warnings by smoke signals and flashing mirrors, letting the war party move invisibly over the sea bottoms. Seated behind the Chee-putk, Diana directed the whole show, getting her bearings from the planetary comnet, putting them smack in the path of D'Montjoy's floating palace, which cruised the southern mid-latitudes, borne along by prevailing winds. Travois carried the stripped-down ultralight and the trussed-up SuperCat.

Days later, Mount Joy hove into sight. The war party lay waiting below, concealed in folds and gullies. Diana sat at the controls of the ultralight, with Chee-putk-wha behind her, holding a knife to the throat of the SuperCat, who was shackled to the airframe. Diana had the only parachute. The SuperCat had to get them aboard the aerostat, supplying the proper call signs. "After that, the ultralight is yours."

The man-cat eyed her coldly, "To do with as I like?"

"Not quite."

"I thought not."

"There is a bomb attached to the undercarriage struts," Diana explained. "As soon as we get off, I will arm the bomb—giving you a hundred seconds to get away. Head right away from the aerostat, and the bomb will disarm. Try to double back and you will be blown out of the sky."

"How do I know the bomb will disarm?"

Diana shrugged. "You have the word of a trained diplomat."

The SuperCat said that would have to do. They took off, with Diana XX piloting the patched-up, overloaded ultralight. She staggered into the air, her elevators out of balance and her rudder not working right. Diana XX struggled just to keep an even keel. Hopefully, she would not have to do any fancy flying.

Mount Joy hung in the sky ahead of them, fringed with hanging gardens. As they got closer, Diana could make out the long slender sky-anchor that kept the floating palace upright, and Guy D'Montjoy's private residence at the aerostat's low apex. Calls came in demanding to know who they were, and where they thought they were headed. "Rock your wings three times," the SuperCat told her. "That signals an emergency landing."

Diana XX did three slow wing dips. It took an appallingly long time for the ship to get level again. ("Making this ship look damaged is wonderfully easy.")

A green flare floated lazily up from the aerostat. "There's your clearance," the SuperCat explained. "Rock again to acknowledge."

Diana XX complied, then climbed slowly, curving toward the landing deck at the far edge of the aerostat. As they passed over the top of the low cone, she pulled back on the stick, putting the overweight ship into a stall. For a moment, they hung suspended, then plunged down toward the aerostat.

Red flares rocketed up. No need to translate, they were being waved off. Diana XX skidded to port, as though trying to obey—then magically regained control, sliding them neatly onto the roof of D'Montjoy's residence. They bounced once, then skidded to a stop.

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Diana leaped out along with Chee-putk-wha, who carried his longsword and hand catapult. She had long ago defused the bomb attached to the undercarriage—to make sure they landed in one piece—but the SuperCat did not know that. He immediately gunned the engine, rolling the little ship off the roof. More red flares erupted, followed by a storm of tracers, stabbing after the ultralight. But the SuperCat knew his stuff—flipping upside down, he spiraled away from the aerostat, leaving the gunners shooting up empty space.

Diana used that chaotic moment to race to the nearest roof-access hatch. Marta had transmitted a complete readout on Mount Joy, including entry codes. No Outback security system could stand up to Peace Corps computers. During most negotiations, Diana counted on reading each side's top-secret dispatches. Door locks were a breeze.

She punched the proper sequence, pulled back the hatch, and dropped through to the ramp below, with Chee-putk-wha a half step behind her. A scrambled call came down from Marta. ("Orbital observation shows the outer garden empty. We've tapped into the security cams, they show guards at the doors, but no D'Montjoy. He must be in his inner sanctum.")

Dashing down the ramp, Diana ignored the hallway leading to the guarded upper door, counting prefab panels instead. When she came to the right one, she motioned to Chee-putk-wha, then stepped aside. Bracing himself against the wall behind them, he gave the panel a savage kick. The panel flew inward. An aerostat's inner structures were ultra-lightweight—not designed to resist angry Neanderthals.

Alarms rang throughout the luxury living quarters. Baron Guy D'Montjoy stood open-mouthed and dripping wet in the shallow end of his private pool. Transparent floors made the indoor pool and zero-g bed seem to hang in midair. Sex toys were scattered about. Mount Joy had been living up to its name. Three teenage hermaphrodites leaped shrieking from the pool, vaulted the balcony rail, and vanished into the outer garden like terrified brown and pink frogs.

Marta reported their exit. ("Three humans have entered the outer garden—all naked and unarmed.")

D'Montjoy stood paralyzed, stark naked in the steamy perfumed air. Having his bath-cum-blow-job cut short by an offplanet diplomat and an outraged Neanderthal had to be a shock. Chee-putk-wha gave him no time to recover. Landing with a splash in the bath, he seized Baron Guy by the wrist and thigh, hoisting him overhead. Diana leaped the pool and dashed across the blue-grass carpet, hooting for the Thal to follow. He obeyed, lugging the wriggling and screaming Baron D'Montjoy. As they burst onto the balcony, Marta signaled from orbit. ("We're got visual contact. I'm sending Alec to get you.")

Alec called from the scramjet. ("On my way!")

Diana sprinted down the garden walk to the aerostat rail, stripping off the parachute. Chee-putk-wha dropped the shaken Baron in a heap at her feet. Guy D'Montjoy glared up at them, holding his arm, saying, "That savage hurt me."

Kneeling down, Diana examined the arm. Deciding it was broken, she ordered up anti-shock, anesthetic, and antibiotic injections from her medikit. Her patient continued to complain, "That brute viciously twisted my arm. And you're being none too gentle, either!"

She bound the arm as best she could, there being no time to set the bone. "Your job is to suppress violence," D'Montjoy reminded her. "Aiding and abetting this barbarian is an unconscionable breach of diplomatic protocol."

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"Take it up with my superiors," Diana suggested. The closest thing she had to a superior was light-years off.

"Don't trifle with me," D'Montjoy warned.

"Perish the thought." Diana pulled him upright, delighted by his yelp of pain. "I am about to give you the parachute off my back." Turning D'Montjoy around, she slipped the parachute harness over his shoulder.

"I don't need a parachute," he protested.

"That's what *you* think!" She pulled the cinches tight, producing another satisfying squeal—D'Monjoy was an absolute hound, and deserved whatever he got.

Baron Guy grimaced and nursed his fractured forearm, saying, "Here now, you and I are both civilized beings. . . ."

"Speak for yourself." She shoved the chute release into his good hand.

He refused to take it. "I cannot believe you are siding with Brute the Barbarian and his horde of Cheap-fucks."

Diana gave an exasperated shrug. "I am not siding with anyone. I am trying to give *you* a chance." She nodded toward Chee-putk-wha. "In half a second, this barbarian brute is going to toss you over the aerostat rail. You can use the parachute or not—as you please."

Grudgingly, Guy D'Montjoy took the release. Diana stepped back to give Chee-putk-wha space.

The Thal drove his sword point-first into the garden walk, keeping the cocked catapult trained on the Baron. Reaching out, he seized D'Montjoy by the parachute harness, lifting him one-handed. Cocking his arm, he brought the two of them face-to-face. For a second they glared at one another, then he flung D'Montjoy backward over the aerostat rail, sending him cartwheeling toward the sea bottom below.

Diana did not wait to see if the chute opened. She spun about and ran along the aerostat edge, with the Thal at her heels. Where the garden curved back around to meet the far wall of D'Montjoy's living quarters, Diana pointed to the proper panel and gave a hoot click. Chee-putk-wha ran straight through the wall, head down, dragging her with him.

Behind the shattered wall was a rampway. Diana raced up it, popping the access hatch at the top. There she paused, holding the hatch closed with one hand. ("What's it like on the roof?")

Marta replied. ("Crawling with armed SuperCats. And more are entering the garden behind you.")

Figures. Diana took a deep breath. ("What about Alec?")

Alec answered for himself. ("Only seconds away.")

From above came the roar of turbofans, rising to a scream. Chee-putk-wha grunted a warning. Diana saw a SuperCat sticking his head through the broken panel. A catapult bolt made the man-cat pull back.

No time to reload. Diana heaved the hatch open and tumbled out onto the roof. The orbital scramjet hovered a few meters overhead, scattering the SuperCats with a hurricane of propwash. Its big bulletproof heat shield protected the ship from return fire. Reaching back through the hatch, she hauled Chee-putk-wha up into the windstorm, calling to Alec. ("Open up!")

A section of heat shield swung down to touch the roof, then skidded their way as Alec threw his hovering ship into reverse. Cannon shells banged off the heat shield and ripped through the roof. Diana dived at the opening, pulling Chee-putk-wha with her. The open section of shield scooped them up into the scramjet's cargo bay.

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Turbofans whined in overdrive, giving maximum lift, and the scramjet shot upward. Diana saw the aerostat drop away as the heat shield swung shut. Safe at last! She barely believed it. From start to finish, it had been a very near thing.

Diana stood at the base of Ares Beanstalk. Ultrastraight and impossibly high, the beanstalk dwindled into heaven, connecting the surface to the Beanstalk geosync station thousands of klicks overhead. Sensors said a car was coming down, one that would take her away.

An energy fence ringed the base of the beanstalk, warding off toothy predators. Beyond the fence, low hills and dead sea bottom stretched off in all directions. Within the fence was the sort of shacktown-cum-animal-colony found around Outback beanstalks and landing strips. Ringed by squash patches and stands of corn, it served as a trading post and sanctuary, inhabited by Thals, half-breeds, SuperChimps, outlaws, and whatnot—all the usual riff-raff responsible for bringing civilization to Outback worlds. Under the Surface Accords, offworlders were safe so long as they were in sight of the beanstalk—but aside from some adventurous peddlers and renegades, the nameless town's inhabitants preferred to live and sleep inside the fence.

Chee-putk-wha was with her, looking fierce and fit atop his favorite moropus, wearing war paint and battle armor—to remind the offworlders that this was not their planet. But Diana could see culture seeping through the energy fence, spreading out from the base of the Beanstalk. Already, wild Thals came here to trade for offplanet items, or just gawk at settled life. She herself had bought Chee-putk-wha a duraluminum pack saddle, a going-away present.

Their time together was up. As soon as Baron Guy had hit the ground, Chee-putks had seized him. Having the head of the opposition in her hands—under a deferred death sentence for violating the Surface Accords—made bargaining infinitely easier. Diana had gotten D'Montjoy's faction hit with an arms embargo, plus a crippling fine. Paying it off would keep them out of mischief, and force them into trade relations with the surface dwellers. She had done what she meant to do—and more.

Chee-putk-wha stared up at the Beanstalk, saying, "You must go."

Not quite a statement, almost a question—but Diana was trained to find meaning between words. "Yes," she shook her head. "I must go."

He turned to meet her eyes. "Is that so?"

This time the question came through clearly—this was as close as he would come to asking her to stay. She stared at him. What was he offering? That she defy her destiny, and for once live a real life on a real world? Roaming the sea bottoms, living in his harem and having half-breed babies? By now there was a bond between them. They had saved each other's lives several times—and their assault on Mount Joy had been appalling fun—but they were still strangers, bred for utterly different lives. All they could really ever share was what had been.

"Yes," she replied. "That is so."

Chee-putk-wha sighed and grunted, glancing up at the towering Beanstalk piercing the blue above, connecting his world to the Cosmos. "Go then." He looked sadly back at her. "Be a ghost. Go back beyond the sky."

She shook her head to say yes. She would go, and someday she would be a ghost, in some new Diana's head. And all this would be like a dream to that future young Diana.

Down came the car, and she went up ❍

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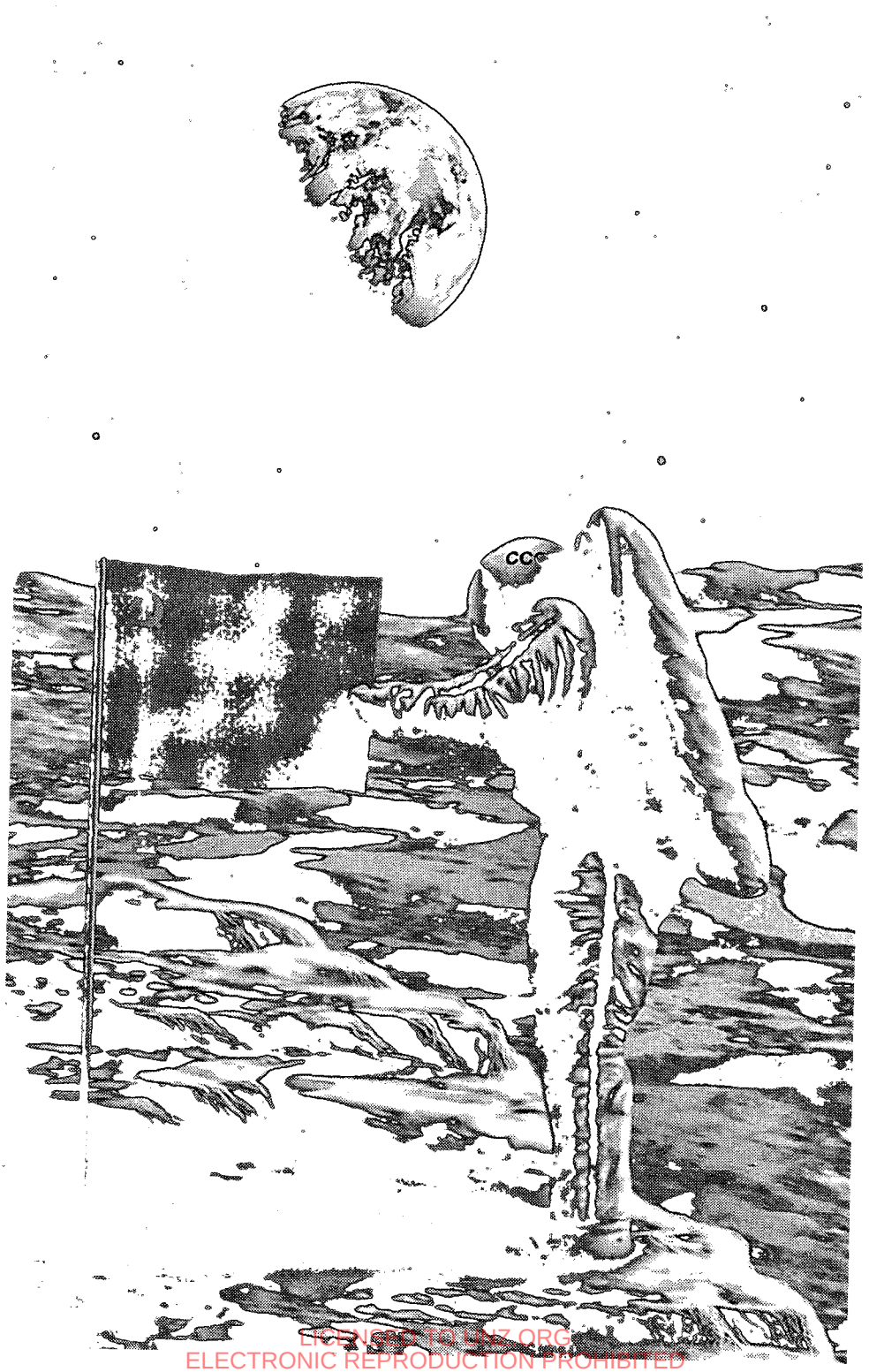

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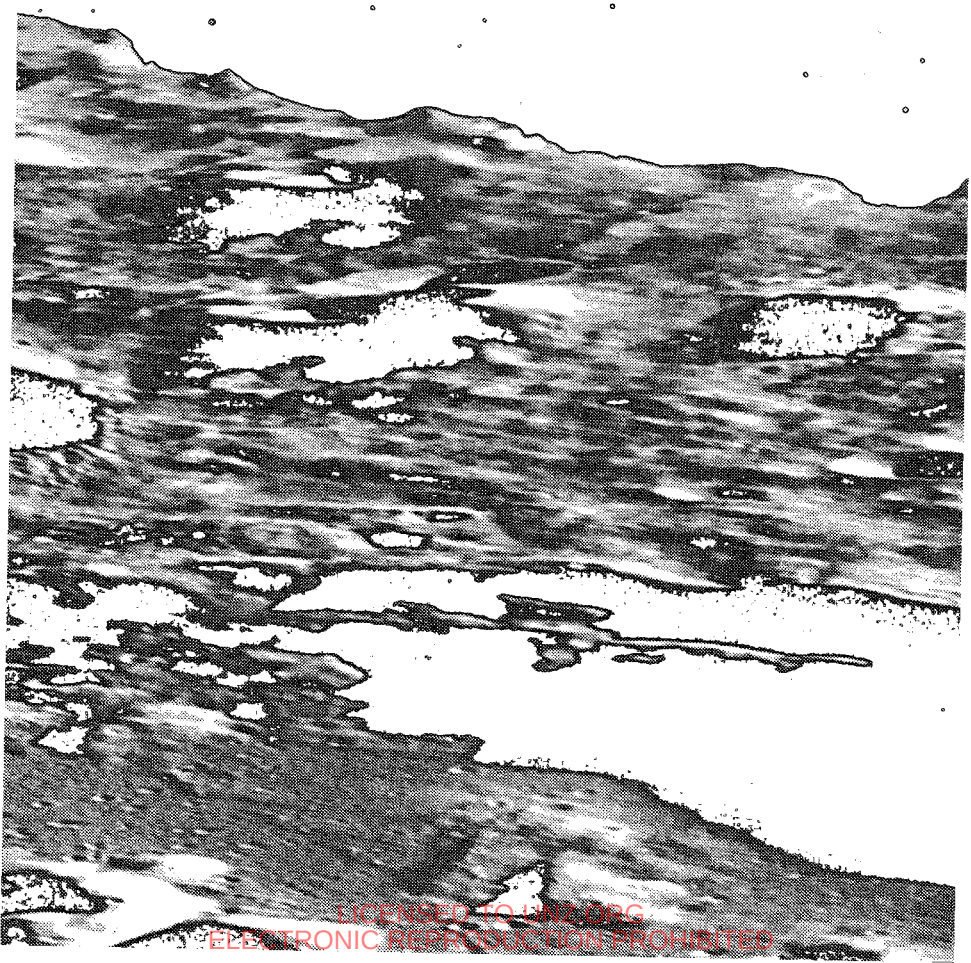
Stephen Baxter

Stephen Baxter's Moon is a place of haunting secrets.
Some may take decades to be revealed,
others might take an eternity . . .

SPINDRIFT

Illustration by Alan Giana



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Look up at the full Moon.

Look for the patch of bright highland at the center of the southern hemisphere, nestling amid the darker seas. The highlands are old territory, my dear Svetlana, battered and scarred by five billion years; the seas are ponds of frozen lava, flooded impact wounds.

Close to the lunar equator, a little to the left of the highland mass, you will find the Known Sea—Mare Cognitum. Here, through a good telescope, you might observe the Fra Mauro complex of craters.

Here, for the last six years, I have made my home; and here, I am now certain, I will die.

I am Vladimir Alexeyevich Zotov, first human being to walk upon the surface of the Moon. I will record as long as I can. Hear my story, Svetlana, my daughter!

I left Earth on October 18, 1965.

A mere ten thousand years after the great impact which budded it from young Earth, the Moon coalesced. The infant world cooled rapidly. Gases driven out of the interior were immediately lost to space.

Planetesimals bombarded the Moon, leaving red-glowing pinpricks in the cooling rind. But soon the hail of impactors ceased. The first volcanism had already begun, dark mantle material pouring through crust faults to flood impact basins and craters and lava-cut valleys. But soon even the lava pulses dwindled.

After just a billion years, the Moon's heart grew cold.

Meanwhile, life exploded over blue, stirring Earth.

In my contoured couch, I felt the shudder of distant valves slamming shut, the rocket swaying as the fuel lines were pulled away. Five minutes before launch, they turned on the music. I felt peaceful.

"Launch key to go point." "Air purges." "Idle run." "Ignition!"

More vibrations, high whinings and low rumbles. The Proton booster began to sway to left and right, as if losing balance. Then acceleration surged, as if the rocket had been unchained.

The weight lifted, and I was thrown forward. It was as if the rocket was taking a great breath. Then the core engines burned, crushing me, and I rose through fire and noise.

The core stage died. Vostok Seven swiveled in space.

I was in orbit. I could see the skin of Earth, spread out beneath me like a glowing carpet.

I flew over the Kamchatka peninsula. A chain of volcanoes stretched from north to south, ice glittering on their summits and crests, and all surrounded by sky-blue water. It was very beautiful.

The control center told me I should prepare for the ignition of my last rocket stage: the Block-D, my translunar engine.

Earth receded rapidly.

I flew through Earth's shadow. I could see the home planet as a hole in the stars, ringed by a rainbow of sunlight refracted through the atmosphere. And, in the center of the planet, I could see a faint grey-blue glow: it was the light of the Moon, shining down on the belly of the Pacific.

Here came the Vice-President of the United States, and NASA head honchos, and even a brace of Moonwalkers. Men in suits. They were on a guided

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tour of the lunar colony experiments in the Johnson Space Center back rooms.

And here was Michaela Cassell, along with her buddy Fraser, two lowly interns tagging along.

The first stop was a machine that could bake oxygen out of lunar rock. It was a cylinder six feet tall, with a hopper for ore at one end, and pipes for circulating hydrogen and water and dumping waste: a clunky-looking, robust piece of chemical-engineering technology.

The NASA PR hack did the tour guide stuff. "You see, you blow hydrogen across heated regolith. That reacts with the oxygen in an ore called ilmenite, an oxide of iron and titanium, to make water. . . . You have basically standard parts here: a 304 stainless steel one hundred psi pressure vessel, swazelock fittings, copper gasket seals, steel tubing. Even the furnace is commercial, a nichrome-wound fuse design. This is a mature technology. But the Moon is a tough place. You need closed-loop fluid systems. In the low gravity, you have larger particles than usual, lower fluidizing velocities, big, slow bubbles in the flow that make for poor contact efficiencies. And you have to figure for minimum maintenance requirements—for instance, the plant has a modular design . . ."

And so on. The old Apollo guys nodded sagely.

The party walked on.

Michaela couldn't help but regard these greying, balding, gap-toothed midwesterners with awe. Christ, she had even gotten to shake John Young's hand, a man who had been there *twice!*

New century, new Moon. After forty years, Americans were returning to the Moon, this time to stay, by God! It had been the results from *Lunar Prospector,* and the more ambitious probes which followed, which had kickstarted all this.

The probe results, she thought, *and* the corpse on the Moon. The body of a Russian, found by an autonomous Dowser in the shadows of a Mare Cognitum crater.

And the corpse, of course, was all Fraser wanted to talk about.

". . . It's quite clear," Fraser said. "To beat Apollo, the Soviets sent up some poor sap in 1965 on a one-way flight."

"The Soviets denied they were ever going to the Moon," Michaela whispered.

"Of course they did, when they lost. But that was a geopolitical lie. *Both* sides had a man-on-the-Moon program. *Both* sides would do anything to win . . . Hence, the stiff. The idea was to keep him resupplied until the capability came along to retrieve him. *We'd* have done it if we had to. Remember *Countdown.*"

"That was just a movie," Michaela whispered. "James Caan—"

"Read the report. NASA SP-4002. Mercury technology. The Soviets covered their resupply flights as failed unmanned probes. Lunas 7, 8, 15, 18. And remember Lunokhod?"

"The Lunokhods *were* science probes."

"The ones they *reported* did some science. The CIA knew about it, of course. But *nobody* had an interest in exposing this. . . ."

The party reached Building 7: something like a chemical plant, huge thickly painted ducts and pipes everywhere. The Vice Prez was here to inspect the Integrated Life Support System Test Facility. This was a three-story-high cylinder, built originally for some long-forgotten Cold War pressurization ex-

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periment. Now the top story had been turned into a habitat. The guys in there used physico-chemical systems to recycle their air and urine, for sixty days at a time. The Vice Prez made a joke. *What do you do at work, daddy?*

They met a woman who had worked in here on a previous trial. She was thrilled to meet real-life Moonwalkers. The team was goal-oriented, she said; they had their own astronaut-style crew patches.

Michaela tried to imagine the cosmonaut on the Moon: six years, alone.

Michaela was going to the Moon. She intended to work her way through NASA, make it up there in the second or third wave of colonists.

Smart modern probes were already crawling all over the Moon: autonomous, packed with micromechanical systems and quantum logic chips, swarming and co-operating and discovering. Soon, humans would follow.

There was ice in the regolith; they knew that for sure. There was ambitious talk of lassoing the Earth-approach asteroid XF11, when it came past in October 2028, and applying its resource. And there were new, ingenious speculations that maybe the interior of the Moon was crammed with water and other volatiles, trapped there since the Moon's savage formation. Riches that would, one day, turn the Moon green.

There were even rumors that the probes had upturned evidence of some kind of sluggish biological activity, in the deep regolith.

But Michaela knew that if it wasn't for the corpse on the Moon, they wouldn't be going anywhere. It was a silent witness to a Cold War shame, the source of a new impulse to go back and do it *nobly* this time.

Born long after Apollo, Michaela knew that she could never be the first to walk on the Moon. Perhaps, though, she'd thought, she could have been the first human to *die* there. But the absurd, self-sacrificing bravery of that dead cosmonaut had robbed her of that ambition.

The first child born, then, she thought. The first mother on the Moon, the first to bring life there. Not a bad goal.

. . . Unless, she thought, there is life there already.

In Building 241, inside big stainless steel tanks, they were growing dwarf wheat. When Michaela looked through a little porthole she could see the wheat plants, pale and sturdy, straining up to the rows of fluorescents above them, warm little green things struggling for life in this clinical environment.

Fraser was still talking about the dead cosmonaut. "We're *all* guilty, Michaela," he said softly. "There is a little patch of the Mare Cognitum forever stained red with human blood. . . ."

And so I took humanity's first step on another world. A little spray of dust, of ancient pulverized rock, lifted up around my feet and settled back.

The ground glowed in the sunlight, but the sky was utterly black. There were craters of all dimensions, craters on craters. It was a land sculpted by impact.

Nothing moved here. There was utter silence. This was disorienting. I fought an impulse to turn around, to see who was creeping up behind me.

When I looked at my own shadow, the sunlight around it came bouncing straight back at me. The shadow of my body was surrounded by an aura, Svetlana, a halo around my helmet.

I felt filled with love for my country. I sang, "*Oh Russia, my dear and wonderful country, / I am ready to give my life for you, / Just tell me when you need it, / And I will answer you only Yes.*"

I went to work.

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* * *

The crystal ship rose out of the tall, thin atmosphere. Samtha turned in her seat, uncomfortably aware of her heavy belly.

The horizon curved sharply, blue and blurred. Sparks crawled busily: ships and surface cars and hovercraft, ferrying people to and fro across the Moon's face. The highlands and Farside were peppered with circular crater lakes, glimmering, linked to the mare oceans by the great drainage canals.

Samtha could see the gigantic feather-wake of the pleasure ships on the Tycho-Nubium.

Soon the night hemisphere was turning toward her. But there was no true dark on the Moon, thanks to the solettas, the huge mirror farms that kept the air from snowing out. The solettas were already a thousand years old—nearly as old as the permanent occupation of the Moon itself—but they, or their successors, would have to keep working a lot longer, now that the Spin-Up had been abandoned.

Wistfully, she looked for the bone-white ice deserts of the lunar poles. The south pole had been Samtha's home for a decade. She had worked there on the great deep-bore projects, seeking rich new sources of volatiles.

Earth was rising. Blue Moon, brown Earth.

Samtha stroked her belly, feeling the mass of the unborn child there. Today she was leaving, for the moons of Jupiter.

Her project had been shut down. For there was life in the Moon.

Samtha herself had found tracks dissolved into the rock by lunar microorganisms, little scrapings just micrometers across. The bacteria fed off the Moon's thin flow of internal heat, and mined carbon and hydrogen directly from compounds dissolved in igneous rocks.

Time on the Moon ran slow. The deep bacteria, stunted, starved of energy and nutrients, reproduced just once every few centuries. But they had been found everywhere the temperature of the rocks was less than a hundred degrees or so. And they shared a common origin with Earth life: the first of them, it seemed, had been survivors of the great impact that had led to the budding-off of the Moon from young Earth. It was life which, though separated for five billion years, was nevertheless a remote cousin of her own cells.

Now the Moon would become a museum and laboratory. And the Moon's stillness, said the enthusiasts, made it an ideal test bed for certain new theories Samtha failed to understand—something to do with the spontaneous collapse of quantum wave functions—perhaps, it was even said, there was a deeper life still to be found in the silent rocks of the Moon.

The Moon, as a laboratory of life and consciousness.

But humanity's role in the future evolution of the Moon would be curtailed. People and their autonomous companions would be restricted to a thin surface layer, limited in the energy they could deploy and the changes they could make.

Samtha had lived through the Die-Back. She accepted the logic; life had to be cherished. But she was a mining engineer, and there was nothing for her to do here. So she was going to Jupiter, to mine turbulent, gravity-wrenched Io—where native life was, as far as anybody knew, utterly impossible.

She had no regrets. She was happy that her child would grow up in the rich cosmopolitan society of the moons.

But Samtha was sentimental. She knew that this turning away meant that the Moon could never be more than a shrunken twin of Earth, doomed only to decline.

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For the last time, the ship soared over the limb of the Moon. Prompted by a murmur from the autonomous ship, Samtha looked out at a grey ellipse, like a mole disfiguring the blue-white face of the Moon. It was the open grave of Vladimir Alexeyevich Zotov, sealed in vacuum under its mile-wide dome. She wondered what that brave Russian would have made of this subtle abandonment of the world he had given his life to reach.

The shuttle tipped up and leapt out of the Moon's shallow gravity well. As the twin worlds receded, watery crescents side by side, Samtha bade a last farewell to the ancient cosmonaut.

Goodbye, goodbye.

My lander rests in a broad valley. There is a broad, meteorite-eroded crater wall nearby, which I call Rimma Crater, for my wife, your dear mother. If I climb this wall—passing through ancient rubble, boulders the size of houses—I can look back over the shining, undulating plain of Fra Mauro. The tracks from my wheeled cart stretch like snail paths down the hillside, to where my lander sits, sparkling like a toy. The ground around the lander is scuffed by my footprints.

The mountains rise up like topped-off pyramids into the black sky. These are mountains that date back almost to the formation of the solar system itself, their contours eroded to smoothness. The constant micrometeorite hail is grinding the Moon to dust. There is a layer of shattered rock and dust, all over the Moon.

I feel isolated, detached, suspended over the rubble of a billion years.

Svetlana, here is how I live on the Moon.

My lander is five meters tall. It consists of a boxy rocket stage standing on four legs, and a fat cabin on top. The cabin is a bulbous, misshapen ball, capped by a fat, wide disk, which is a docking device. Two dinner-plate-sized antennae are stuck out on extensible arms from the descent stage. The whole assemblage is swathed in a green blanket, for thermal insulation.

My cabin is a cozy nest, lined with green fabric. My couch occupies much of the space. Behind my head, there is a hatch. There are three small viewing ports recessed into the cabin walls. At my left hand is a console with radio equipment and instruments to regulate temperature and air humidity. On the wall opposite my face, TV and film cameras peer at me. My food is squeezed from tubes. Cupboards set in the walls of the cabin are crammed with such tubes.

The cabin is, in fact, an orbital module adapted from Korolev's new spacecraft design, called Soyuz. This lander is an early model, of course. Little more than an engineering prototype, lacking an engine to bring me home.

Crude solar arrays are draped on frames across the surface of the Moon. In the lander are batteries, capturing the sun energy that keeps me alive during the long nights. But after so many years, the lunar weather has taken its toll. The insulation blankets are discolored. All the equipment is thoroughly irradiated, and remarkably dusty. The paint has turned to tan, but it is uneven, and where I look more closely I can see tiny micrometeorite pits, little craters dug into the paintwork.

Each time I get back into my shelter, I find new scars in my faceplate: tiny pits from the invisible interplanetary sleet within which I walk. Soon I will be blinded.

Moon dust gets in my lungs and causes chest pains. It eats away at joints

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and seals. Eventually, I suspect, it will overtake me, and everything mechanical will just stop working.

One good thing is that, in the lunar vacuum, the dust, when disturbed, will settle out ballistically. I have kept it clear of my solar panels simply by placing them a meter off the ground, too high for casually disturbed dust to reach.

I have filed reports on many such observations, for I am enthusiastic about the future of the colonized Moon.

cal342 let her viewpoint soar over the surface of the abandoned Moon.

The evidence of the ancient terraforming effort lay everywhere: the gouged-out canals that the micrometeorite wind had yet to erode, the jewel-like cities still sparkling under a thickening layer of dust, the glimmer of frozen air in the shadowed cold traps of the poles.

A million years of human history were wrapped around this small world. That was almost as long as Earth itself—for the first immigration to the Moon had occurred just a few dozen millennia after the emergence of the primal *Sapiens* species itself—but only shreds and shards of primitive technology remained here, as if ape-fingers had never disturbed this dusty ground.

Now that ancient equilibrium was under threat.

A perturbed Oort Cloud comet was approaching. It would be, it was said, the greatest impact event in the solar system since the formation of Earth-Moon itself. And cal342 was here to witness it.

She found the two bodies nestling in an eroded crater at a dust sea's edge.

The first was the physical shell she had prepared for herself. She settled into it.

. . . She found herself breathing. She was gazing at the sky from within a cage of bone: authentically primate, of course, but oddly restricting.

The second body, lying beside her now, was much more ancient.

Even now, with primate eyes, cal342 could see the intruder. It was the brightest object in the sky save the sun: a spark of glowering red in the plane of the ecliptic, a point of light in a place it didn't belong.

It was a star, called Gliese 710.

Gliese was making its closest approach to the sun: close enough that it had plunged into the Oort Cloud, the thick belt of comets that lay at the periphery of the solar system. For millennia already the rogue dwarf had been hurling giant ice worldlets into the system's vulnerable heart. Many of cal342's contemporaries had, in fact, bluntly refused to endure this difficult time, and had suspended consciousness until the star had receded.

Not cal342, though.

cal342 had lived a very long time, and she had achieved a certain contentment. She could think of no better way of terminating her existence than this.

For humanity faced a crisis of purposelessness.

Once humans, proudly conscious, had indulged in a certain arrogance. Quantum physics described the universe as filled with uncertainties and probability and ghostly multiple existences. The distinguishing property of consciousness was the ability to *observe:* for when an observation was made, the quantum functions would collapse, uncertainty would disappear, and the universe became—if only briefly and locally—definite.

Humans had spread among the stars, and had found nobody like themselves. So, it had seemed, humans were unique in their consciousness. Perhaps by their observing, humans were actually calling the universe itself into

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existence. Perhaps humans had been *created* by the universe so that it could generate itself.

But then, in laboratories on the still and silent Moon, spontaneous quantum collapse had been detected in inanimate objects.

In humble rocks, in fact.

An individual particle might take a hundred million years to achieve this—but in a large object, such as a Moon rock, there were so very many particles that one of them would almost immediately collapse its wave function—and then, in a cascade effect of entangled quantum functions, the rest would immediately follow. It was called, after the twentieth-century scientists who first proposed the phenomenon, the Ghirardi-Rimini-Weber effect.

The agonized debate had lasted a hundred thousand years.

At the end of it, there was no doubt that the rocky Moon—scarred by impacts and the clumsy meddling of humans, bearing its own sullen biological lode—was itself *alive*, and, in some huge geologic sense, aware. And so were other small, stable worlds, and many other unpromising structures. The uniqueness of humans was lost.

Now they knew how to look, humans found nothing but mind, infesting the giant structures of the universe. But it was mind that was patient, geologic, immortal. Nothing like their freakish selves.

There was nobody, anywhere, to talk to; and certainly nobody to care.

Science slowed. Art grew decadent. The various species of humanity fragmented and turned in on themselves. They were, it seemed, dancing in the face of oblivion, consuming the resources of worlds—even committing elaborate forms of suicide.

Like cal342 herself.

cal342 turned her head—it was like operating machinery—and looked at the body that lay beside her.

For almost a million years, since the collapse of its protective domes, the body had been exposed to the micrometeorite rain. The top of the body had imploded, leaving a gaping, empty chest cavity, a crumbling hollow shell around it. The head was exposed, and eroded pinnacles of bone hinted at the shape of a skull, eye sockets staring. This human corpse was of the Moon now, reduced to lunar dust, made the same color as the dark regolith.

Of the Moon, and of the life within it.

Was it possible that this ancient traveler, coupled to the chthonic mind of the Moon, was still, in some sense, *aware?* Was he dreaming, as he waited for the comet?

And if so, what were his dreams?

She looked up. The comet light was bright now.

Her choice of viewpoint had been deliberate. Here she was, as humans had always been, her very size suspended between atoms and stars. She was a transient construct arising from baryonic matter, itself a small island in a sea of dark. Her consciousness was spindrift, soon to dissipate.

She dug her hands into crumbling regolith. She wondered if the patient Moon understood what would become of it today.

Fear stabbed.

At the appointed hour, I saw the cargo vessel descend.

It was a glittering star in the sunlight, its rocket flame invisible. It came down over the prow of Rimma Crater, perhaps a mile from me. This marked

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success, Svetlana! Some past craft had failed to leave Earth orbit, or had missed the Moon, or had come down impracticably far away from me, or had crashed.

Elated, I loaded up my cart and set off.

Soon I approached the walls of Rimma Crater. The climb was tiring. My suit was stiff, as if I was inside an inflated tire.

At the crater rim, there were rocks everywhere, poking through a mantle of dust. The crater walls plummeted steeply to a floor of smashed-up rock a hundred meters below.

And there, planted in the crater's center, was the spacecraft.

But the landing had been faulty. The frame had collapsed, and the Lunokhod rover—an eight-wheeled bathtub shape—lay smashed open, glittering, amid the wreckage of the landing stage.

There was a light in the sky. I looked up. I had to tip back on my heels to do it.

I saw the Earth, a fat crescent, four times the size of a full Moon. And there, crossing the zenith, was a single, brilliant, unwinking star: it was the orbiting Command Module of an American Apollo spacecraft, waiting to take its astronauts home.

I think I knew at that moment that I would never return home.

I readied my cart and clambered down into Rimma Crater, preparing to salvage the Lunokhod.

The comet nucleus slammed into the Moon's southern hemisphere.

A shock wave raced into the structure of the impactor and vaporized it immediately. A cloud of gas and molten silicate and iron billowed away from the Moon. And a second wave dug down into the ancient hide of the Moon, pulverizing and compressing. The lunar rocks rebounded with equal violence; they disintegrated utterly and exploded from the new cavity.

Then—seconds after the impact, even before the ejecta fell back—the excavated zone began to freeze. Waves of liquid rock froze like ripples on a sluggish pond. The new mountain walls began to collapse under their own weight, forming complex terraces.

But now the ejecta spray fell back from space, blanketing the new mountains in a vast sheet of molten rock.

It was over in minutes. Immediately, the steady hail of micrometeorites began its millennial work, darkening and eroding the new deposits.

The cooling scar was the largest impact crater in the solar system.

The Moon, spinning, cooling, steadily receded from its parent Earth. For a time, its axis of spin rocked, disturbed by Gliese and the impact. But, at last, even that residual motion died away, and once more the rigid face of the Moon was locked toward Earth.

But the impact, and Gliese's ferocious gravity, had loosened Earth's ancient grip on its battered offspring.

Month by month, the Moon's orbit became wider, more chaotic.

At last the Moon wandered away, to begin an independent path around the sun.

Goodbye, goodbye.

It was Alexei Arkhipovich Leonov who informed me of the decision of the Presidium. One cosmonaut to another. I admired the way he spoke. I am not certain I could have achieved such dignity.

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The N-1 booster program has been abandoned after continuing failure. No more cosmonauts will be flying to the Moon.

Our managers, it seemed, tried to strike a bargain with the Americans. If they would use a late Apollo flight to retrieve me, my flight would remain a secret—as would my triumph—and the Americans would take the public credit for reaching the Moon first. It is not a bargain I would have welcomed, even if it had saved my life!

But the last Apollos have been canceled by the Americans; tens of millions of dollars are too high a price to pay, it seems, for my life.

My stranding here was always a possibility, of course. Even so, I accepted the challenge gladly! My mission, should it succeed, could only reflect glory and honor on the Communist Party, and on Soviet science and technology.

. . . But there was something in Alexei's tone that conveyed to me a deeper truth.

The Soviet Union cannot admit that at the heart of their space program was the callous sacrifice of a cosmonaut. And NASA will never admit that their pilot was not the first to the Moon. Thus both sides are locked forever in a shameful compact of deception.

Stranded on the Moon, waiting to die, I am an object of shame, not of glory. I am a relic of a different age, to be hidden.

My cabin is full of noise. There are hundreds of electrical devices, fans, regenerators, carbon dioxide absorbers and filters. It is like being inside a busy apartment. But in an apartment, a home, there are voices, the noises of life. Here there is only machinery.

I do not begrudge Colonel Armstrong his glory. He is a good pilot. If Korolev and Gagarin had lived, I believe it might have been different.

Humans had exploded from their planet, dug briefly into the Moon's ancient hide, and disappeared.

After the separation of Earth and Moon, humans never returned.

The sun was gradually growing warmer. After a mere billion years, life on Earth was overwhelmed. Five billion years more, and the sun's failing core caused it to swell up and destroy its inner planets.

Not the Moon, though.

The freed Moon circled patiently before the sun's swollen, ferocious face, until the last fires died, and the sun collapsed.

A binary star system, long extinguished, veered past the sun; and the Moon, at last, was torn free.

It began a long journey into the darkness, out of the plane of the disintegrating solar system.

For a time, new stars flared around the wandering Moon. And in the rings of rock which surrounded the developing stars, small rocky worlds were born. They glowed briefly in the light of their gaudy parents, and waited for the stillness that would inevitably come.

At last, though, the galaxy's resources were depleted. After a hundred billion years, no new stars could form. And after a hundred *thousand* billion years, the last of the stars were reaching the end of their lives.

The great darkness fell over the universe.

Slow cosmic expansion isolated the wreckage of the galaxy from its neighbors. And within that wreckage—a drifting mass of black holes, neutron stars, black dwarfs, stray planets—the soft leakage of gravitational waves caused a gentle, subtle collapse.

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The remnant of a star cluster orbited the giant black hole that lurked, slowly evaporating, at the core of the galaxy.

The drifting Moon approached the cluster.

It is lunar night. I am walking across the face of a new Moon. My suit is protesting noisily.

I climb the wall of Rimma Crater.

The phases of the Earth and Moon are opposite. And so the Earth is full, fat above me, a shiny blue ball, laced about by cloud. Its light is blue and cold, and somehow it seems to suit the gentle curves of the Moon, these old, eroded hills.

Time is stretched out here, in the Moon's soft gravity. A day lasts a month. And beneath that there is a still grander scale of time, of the slow evolution of the Moon itself. I look at the hills, the crater-sculpted plain beneath, and I know that I could have come here a billion years ago, or a billion years from now, to find the same scene.

The Moon cares nothing for time.

Perhaps Earth, with its complex geology and cargo of life, is unique. But the galaxy must be full of small, timeless worlds like this one. Explorers of the future will stand on a hundred, a thousand worlds like this, peering up at different patterns of stars. And will they remember *this,* the original Moon, the prototypical destination for mankind?

And as I frame these dreamlike thoughts, it is as if, for a brief moment, I have come further than the Moon itself: as if, in fact, I have spread myself across the stars, to the ends of space and time, like the godlike people of the farthest future.

They have stopped talking to me.

I refuse to be hidden upstairs, on this Moon, like an insane uncle.

Trillion-year meditations were enriched by the slow gathering of rocky worlds, torn free of the evaporating galaxy.

Here was one such, approaching the great clustering of mind, as if with caution.

Curiosity was engaged, briefly.

Remnants of crude structures, long vanished, were observed on its surface—and even traces of an ancient carbon-hydrogen body, a spindrift remnant clinging to the rocky world, preserved by the deeper geologic soul.

But none of that was important.

If there had been awareness of humanity's brief span, there would have been only pity.

Humans had been tragic, fluttering, fragile creatures: spindrift, with no future or past. And they had vanished without ever understanding *why* they were so alone.

The truth was, humans had emerged in a dull corner of the universe.

Amid the crashing energies of galaxy cores, by the light of clusters of a million swarming stars, in the giant molecular clouds that spanned whole systems: *those* were the deeps where the great minds had gathered, minds like gongs, minds beyond the reach—even the imagination—of mankind. No wonder humans had never understood.

The spark of chthonic consciousness—swimming out of the darkness, its mountains eroded almost to smoothness—was enfolded at last.

Welcome, welcome.

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* * *

I lie in the soft, silent dust.

I can feel its cold, sucking at my warm body through the layers of my suit. I am in the crater's shadow here; the sun will never reach my crumbling bones. I will record as long as I can, dear Svetlana.

The psychologists who prepared me said that, according to Freud, there is no time in the unconscious. And that, at certain intensely charged moments, there is no time in consciousness itself.

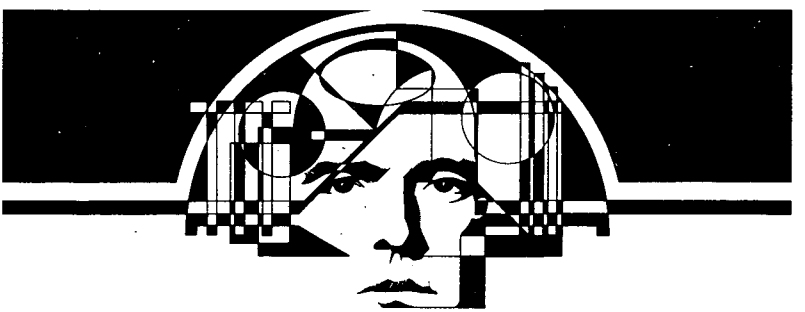
Can that be true?

And can it be that, at the moment of death, the most intense moment of all, the mind accelerates and the soul becomes eternal—an eternity crammed into that last exquisite instant?

If so, here on the timeless Moon, what will I dream?

Svetlana, the daughter I never held! I love you!

Tears flood my eyes, blurring the light of the Earth. ❍



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with **Kim Stanley Robinson** and **Geoffrey A. Landis**
February 9, 1999 @ 9:00 p.m. EST

Walter Jon Williams February 23, 1999 @ 9:00 p.m. EST

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PIONEER'S SONG

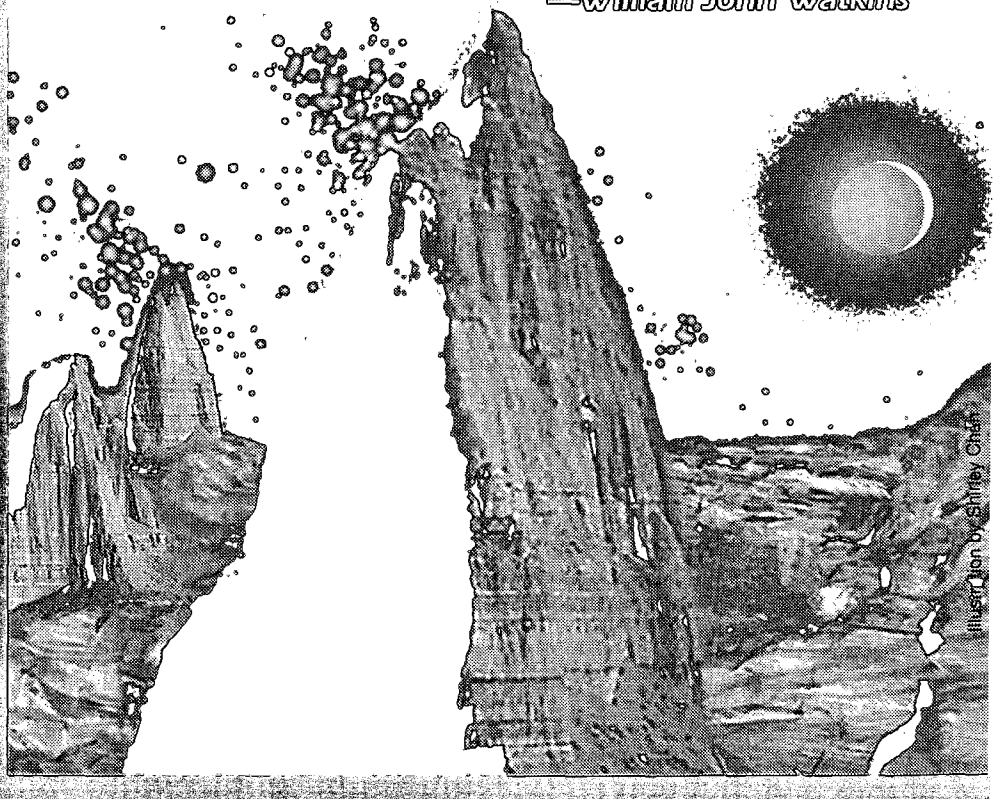
There is a longing when you can't go back
however much you weighed your coming out;
it isn't based on fear or doubt
or that the things on Earth you lacked you lack

out here as well, and lack things more and lost
things here no riches can replace.
You could not guess when hucksters sang of space
how much this coming light years out would cost

when room seemed worth the risk and
risk seemed right.
Those tight wrapped bodies jettisoned on the fly
go tumbling out between the stars. You wonder why
you could not see what now you see all night

in dreams, while out across the void turn end on end
the bodies of a wife, a child, a lifelong friend.

—William John Watkins



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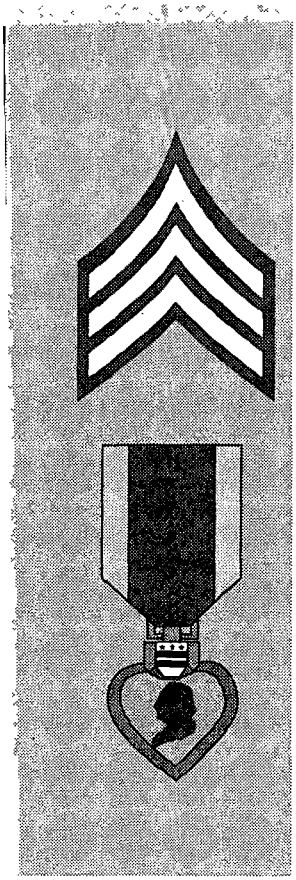

Mark W. Tiedemann

GALLO

As a student of history, the author knows that there are many different directions any war could have taken. The possible paths, the alternate choices, the battles that we prepared for but didn't fight, the losses we might have endured or might never have incurred, all make for endless speculation. Some wars, like W.W.II and Viet Nam, have been closely considered. Others are mostly overlooked today. "'Gallo' grew out of conversations with my father about one of America's 'forgotten' wars—Korea. I have made over forty sales since my first professionally published story. This one is for my father."

I didn't know Gallo till Yokohama, but I first saw him in a field hospital in Korea. Both of us lying in a drafty tent under too-bright lights that failed to fill in the shadows. The shrapnel in my left shoulder hurt worse than the stitched tears in my side and hip, but it meant home. I felt pretty lucky. Luckier when they brought Gallo in, his head wrapped in crimson bandages and his uniform splotched with dirt and blood. The M.A.S.H. surgeons erected screens, set up another, brighter light, and for over an hour I listened to the sounds of scissors and gauze, breathing and curses, terse instructions and hushed discussions.

He lived. If anyone else in the tent had been in any mood to bet, I'd have taken odds that this guy wouldn't make it. But they dug a bullet out of his brain, a couple out of his chest, sewed him up, and somehow he hung on. They kept changing his drips, that was how I knew. They left the curtain up, so I couldn't see him, but he was never unattended.

Four days later we were loaded aboard a noisy C-119 and sent to Shitosi on Hokkaido and from there down to Yokohama.

In the hospital they worked on me to remove as much metal from my shoulder as they could get to and while I recovered I witnessed Gallo receive a Purple Heart, a Distinguished Service Cross, and the Medal of Honor. They didn't expect him to live, otherwise they would have waited till he got home and they could give it to him in Washington, DC.

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The next day Gallo woke up. I was sitting by his bed, staring at the medals on his nightstand, when he opened his eyes wide and looked around frantically. I thought, *Call the nurse,* and sat there.

When he saw me he blinked and frowned. "Jeffrey. . . ?"

How did he know that? He'd been in a coma. We were in the same regiment, but we'd never met. "Yeah?"

"Where?"

"Yokohama."

For a few moments it looked as if he didn't understand. Then his face changed. He was terrified. He looked around, saw the IV drip, and confusion mixed with the fear.

I thought he might hurt himself. I started to rise and moved too fast. My leg ached and I caught myself on the bed. "Look, George, it's okay—lemme get the nurse, okay? You're in a hospital. You had a bad time. Take it easy. They pulled you out of Hungnam, same as me, but you were worse, but it's okay now. You beat the odds. It's okay."

I kept babbling like that until his eyes focused on me and I saw the panic subside. He was thoughtful for a time and I just kept talking, making sounds to calm him down.

"Hungnam," he said.

"Yeah, Hungnam. You were up by Chosin Reservoir, remember, in Yudamni? My unit was down by Chinhung-ni. The CCF came down on us and General Smith pulled us back toward Hungnam so we could hook up with the Seventh . . ."

He closed his eyes and nodded. ". . . remember. Sure."

I let out a sigh and settled back in the chair.

"Korea," he said, as if making sure he had it right.

"Right. Korea. First Marines."

"Yeah . . ." He looked at me. "How'd you get out of the drink, Jeffrey?"

"Huh?"

"Ariake Bay . . . how'd you get out? Was it the light?"

My nerves jangled, as if I almost knew what he meant. But I put it down to being startled by him opening his eyes. "Look, you want me to call the doctor? You've been out for almost two weeks."

He swallowed loudly and looked at me again. "Sorry. I—yeah, maybe . . ."

Grateful to be let go, I limped down the hallway till I saw a nurse. I told her he was awake and she rushed off for the doctors. I went back to my bed and watched a team come hurrying in to huddle around him for the next fifteen minutes. Finally one of them came over to me.

"You were there when he woke up?"

"Yessir."

"Describe it."

He wrote down what I told him, frowned over the same comments that disturbed me, then thanked me and went back to the huddle. Soon they drifted off, whispering among themselves, amazed as I was. They hadn't expected him to come to, either.

Over the next few days, more doctors came to see him, then several officers, and one guy from the State Department. On the fifth day I hobbled over to him.

"Hey, how you feeling, George?"

He looked at me curiously for several seconds and I thought he had forgotten me.

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"I was here when you woke up, remember?"

"Yeah. My name's not George."

"No offense. I'm Jeff Lazar."

"I know."

"Yeah, I couldn't help noticing. But I don't know you."

He frowned at that, then gave a little shrug. "Gallo."

"Good to know you. Never met a Medal of Honor recipient before."

He looked surprised.

"What did you do?" I asked. "I heard it was bad up there. Bad enough where we were, but around Chosin—"

"I don't remember." Then: "Should be yours . . ."

"Right, sure. Don't worry. It'll come back. In the meantime, enjoy it. You're a celebrity."

He gazed at me for a long time. His eyes were pale blue and he was older than I had originally thought. A lot of us were young, barely out of high school, a few in our early twenties, but there were quite a few old-timers from the last war. The Big One. Or Two, depending how you counted. Gallo looked like one of those. He'd been in during World War II.

"You really don't remember?" he asked, a second before I could ask the same question.

"Remember what?" I laughed. "It was night, cold as hell, and all of a sudden there were Chinese everywhere. Flares, grenades, shouting. Me and Spencer tried to get the .50 set up and Blam! I wake up on a truck heading south, my ears ringing so loud I can't hear anything, so it's like a dream, except that I hurt all over. Sure, I remember." Then something else came to me. "Spencer didn't make it." Why hadn't I remembered that till then? I felt myself losing control. "They told me later."

"No, I meant—forget it."

"The other day, when you came to, you said something about Ariake Bay. What'd you mean?"

He shook his head.

"You knew my name, too. How'd you know my name?"

"I said forget it. You got a cigarette?"

"No, not on me. I'll see if I can get some. Got a preference?"

"Chesterfields."

I'd more than half expected him to say Luckys, but that would have been too much. He closed his eyes then and after a few more minutes I went back to my bed.

I tried to sleep, but couldn't. All those faces crowding around me, flat and washed out in the too-bright light from the flare. I wished Gallo had kept his questions to himself. I didn't want to remember that. So many of them and just me and Spencer, him jabbering away like he always did when he was nervous, trying to keep the panic at bay and set up our gun. The flare went out and the faces disappeared. Until the explosion.

Gallo recovered quickly. The next day he sat up, the day after he took solid food, and the day before Christmas Eve he got out of bed. Compared to the head wound, everything else seemed minor—a couple holes in his chest, sure, but no major organs punctured. He limped, like me, but he got around okay.

He came by my bed and asked how I felt. I'd gotten him a carton of cigarettes for Christmas and he bought me a bottle of Crown Royal. My favorite.

"How'd you know?"

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He smiled thinly. "Oh, when you almost die with someone you pick up on things."

"Hey, I didn't almost die. You, on the other hand, came back *from* the dead."

"Well. Maybe."

The next day a colonel came to see me to inform me that I'd been tapped for a Purple Heart and a Distinguished Service Cross. I didn't understand—what did I do other than pass out and get lucky? The only reason I was the one lying there and not Spencer were the odds. Statistics. Someone made a choice to aim to the right instead of the left, someone else happened to get in the way of everything else. But I said yessir, thank you very much, and kept my doubts to myself. He also asked if I wouldn't mind deferring the award until I got back to the States, because they were sending Gallo to Washington after all for a ceremony at the White House and they wanted me to travel with him.

"Whose request was that?"

"Actually, Sergeant Gallo's."

Sergeant. I hadn't known, but it fit. Men in as long as him, most of them had rank. "Sure," I said. "I'd be honored to."

"Good. You'll both get your discharge afterward."

"When are we shipping out?"

"The doctors want to watch him awhile longer, but I'd say in a week or so."

"Thank you, sir."

I wondered why they were in such a hurry. Convalescence for a wound like Gallo's could be six months, but here they were sending him Stateside less than seven weeks after he'd come into that M.A.S.H. tent. It *was* an astonishing recovery, but still, I thought if it was me I'd like to be coddled just a little more than that. I figured there was a political reason behind it—they wanted the ceremony for a standing hero before some complication killed him in the hospital—and maybe the doctors in Yokohama wanted to hand him off to Walter Reed as fast as they could, to study. To "observe," as they like to say.

Two days before we shipped out I found Gallo in the small library the hospital maintained. He went along the rows of books, silently reading each title, his lips moving slightly, fingers brushing the spines, as if making sure they were real. He pulled one out and opened it, read something, nodded, and shelved it. He went a little further, found another one. He sat down with it and looked up.

"Oh. Jeffrey."

"Just call me Jeff, sir."

"Don't call me 'sir,' I—"

"—work for a living, yessir. Are you looking forward to going home?"

"I don't know. What's it like these days?"

I didn't know what to say to that. My confusion must've shown. He waved a hand.

"Never mind. Yeah, I'm looking forward to it. Just seems like forever since I've been there."

"How long you been in?"

"Since '42."

"Jesus!"

"Maybe," he said cryptically, and started reading.

I started to leave, then went to a shelf and found an atlas. I opened it to a

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map of the entire Japanese archipelago, which included Korea. Ariake Bay lay in the middle of the western side of Kyushu.

"Do you believe in God, Jeff?"

I snapped the atlas shut and put it back. "I suppose. Haven't thought about it much since Sunday school."

"Not even at Chinhung-ni?"

"I was way too busy there to think about it."

He laughed, a kind of papery sound. Great, I thought, I'm going home with a holy roller. But he went back to his reading and I left shortly afterward. On my way back to my bed I thought, that's not really such a strange question coming from a man with a hole in his brain.

An ambulance took us to the airfield and to my surprise we boarded a Dakota. I'd expected a boat home, but I guessed Gallo rated officer treatment now. I wondered how *I'd* handle it, knowing that even generals had to stop and salute me.

An army doctor and a nurse traveled with us, but they stayed up toward the front, talking with the radio operator and co-pilot, while Gallo and I stayed back by the mail sacks and extra parachutes. Gallo stared out the window down at the ocean most of the time.

I dozed off for awhile, but faces filled my dreams, bright bleached faces, and I started awake. Gallo was watching me. I straightened myself up as best I could and tried to pretend everything was all right.

"Bad?" he asked.

I thought about ignoring him. Then I thought, if anyone knows how to deal with this it's someone who's been in nearly ten years. I nodded.

"Yeah. I can't stop feeling like I don't belong here."

"Why you and not your friend?"

"Yeah."

When he didn't say anything more I looked at him and found him staring back out the window. I became angry at that.

"So?" I said.

"So?"

"Does it get any better?"

He shook his head. "Luck has nothing to do with it. Odds. Numbers. How many bullets fired per how many casualties effected. No reason at all why him and not you. Statistics and probabilities. No matter what other explanation you give it, you know it all amounts to statistics and probabilities, and that's no answer at all. Not one you can do anything with." He blinked then. "Sorry. You wanted something better."

I gnawed the inside of my mouth, working at the twists he'd just given me, things I already believed, but did me no good. I let it drop. Gallo returned to his window.

Coming into sight of Honolulu, though, he scowled and turned away. I realized then that he'd been in the marines since just after Pearl Harbor. I'd been about twelve when that had happened and I remembered people in my neighborhood thinking at first it was a hoax, like that war of the worlds thing on the radio in '38, and then, when they understood that it wasn't, feeling angry and frightened and baffled.

We had a day's layover at Hickam Field. They put us in a room together and Gallo reported to the hospital for a check-up. When he came back he looked pale. He sat on his bunk, smoking one cigarette after another, while I waited to see if he'd open up.

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"I've got family in Taos, I think," he said finally. "You don't mind detouring before we get to Washington?"

"No. Nobody's waiting for me."

"I'm not sure anyone's waiting for me, either. I just want to see." He lit another cigarette. "Edwin Schrödinger proved it."

"Proved what?"

"God's existence."

Uh oh, I thought, here goes. "Who?"

"Schrödinger. He was a physicist."

"And he proved God's existence? Imagine that. Does the pope know?"

Gallo smiled at that. "Schrödinger did the math to prove that things don't exist until we look at them."

"Come again?"

"Atomic particles act like waves sometimes, particles other times. Depends on how you observe them. Schrödinger came up with a neat experiment to demonstrate it. He used a cat—"

"Hey, I remember that! My science teacher back in Trenton told us. That the one with the box and the bottle of poison?"

Gallo nodded. "That one."

I didn't remember much else about it, except the jokes afterward about if you hadn't been caught doing something then really, according to Schrödinger's Cat, you hadn't done it. The principal of the school never accepted it, though, so it seemed a pretty useless idea. But I remembered Mr. Rutherford being real excited about it at the time.

"The idea," Gallo said after a while, "was that everything is only a probability until it's observed. It forces a thing to be one way or the other. Its very existence is determined by the act of looking."

I saw then that Gallo's hands were shaking and he blinked nervously. I decided against the flip remark I'd almost made. This meant something to Gallo.

"Yeah," I said, "but . . . wasn't that about really tiny things? I mean, he was stretching the point a bit, talking about a cat, wasn't he?" I was surprised at myself for remembering that much.

Gallo shrugged. "Maybe. Can you prove that I exist when I'm nowhere around? For all you know, I might vanish until the next time you see me. How do you know I was real before we met?"

I shook my head. "I give up. How?"

"Faith. You believe I exist when you can't see me. It's the same for everything. Ever see the Coliseum in Rome?"

"No."

"But you believe it exists, right?"

"Well, sure—"

"Why?"

"It's *always* been there!"

He ignored that. "Tell me, when did you first learn about Korea?"

"What? That we were going there?"

"No, before that. That such a place even existed."

"I don't know. School, maybe."

"But you don't doubt that it existed before you heard of it."

If he hadn't been talking so quietly and so intently, I'd have gotten up and walked out right then. But my scalp tingled and I felt anxious.

"Faith," he said. "Reality will take care of itself, you don't have to pay attention to it for it to exist. Right?"

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"Sure, I guess."

"Well, then, along comes Schrödinger who proves that that's not exactly true. That, in fact, for things to be as they are, they have to be observed."

I lost my patience. "Jesus, there're people everywhere! Someone's doing the looking!"

He looked mildly surprised. "Ah, but how do you know they are? Faith. You have faith they are. And what do you know, it turns out to be true. You know why? Because they're being observed."

I held back a groan. "God?"

"He's looking at everything."

"And that guarantees it's real." I grunted. "Gives a whole new meaning to the concept of guardian angel."

He nodded slowly, stubbed out his cigarette, and lit another one. There was more, I was sure. I worked at my unease. The man had nearly died, he deserved attention. I had to admit, though, that it was a fascinating idea.

He finished that cigarette and took out another. "Sometimes, though, God blinks."

"Excuse me?"

"I asked for you to travel with me, Jeffrey—"

"Jeff."

"—because I don't . . . hell, you're going to think I'm nuts. Because I don't want to vanish. Not again."

I thought about reporting him to the doctors. But I'd seen people crack up under pressure and more often than not get through it to come out the other side just fine. So instead of leaving him, I said, "You want to explain that?"

"I was in Operation Olympic."

"Never heard of it."

"That's because it didn't happen."

"Sergeant Gallo, you're not making any sense."

He sighed. "The war in Europe ended in May, 1945. My unit was in Italy. We had a week's furlough. In June we shipped to the Pacific. Okinawa had fallen by the time we got there. Airfields were built and stockpiles laid in. More men and materiel arrived every day. They used to joke in Britain before D-Day that if we put one more truck on it, the island would sink. Okinawa looked like that. It was obvious what was coming. We were building up for the invasion of Japan."

"Operation Olympic?" I'd never heard about any of this, except for the what-if talk you hear now and then. Sure, there'd been talk about invading Japan. Then we didn't have to. But at that moment I did not doubt a word Gallo said. Maybe later I'd think he was, indeed, nuts, but right then I knew he spoke the truth. His truth.

"That was the first part. Second part was Operation Coronet. Olympic was the invasion of Kyushu. The idea was—should've been, maybe—to continue island hopping up the chain of islands between Okinawa and Kyushu—Amami-O-Shima, Kuchino, Yaku-Shima—so we could hit them hard and maybe have a fall-back position closer than five hundred miles. Instead, we jumped ahead and took Fukue-Jima. It moved the whole operation forward from November to August. Rumor was the negotiations with the Soviets weren't going so good and maybe it'd be a good idea to finish this before they could shift their forces to the Pacific."

Gallo closed his eyes and leaned his head back. The cigarette burned between his fingers, unnoticed.

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"Mine sweepers went into Ariake Bay to clear us a path. We were going to land north of Kumamoto in a coordinated strike with forces landing at Kagoshima and Kushima on the south of the island, and just below Miyazaki and north of Nobeoka on the east. Cut the island in half, push the Home Army north to Kitakyushu. Plan then was to bomb them into surrender. We sailed into Ariake Bay just before midnight on August 8. There were four of us who'd been together since North Africa, the only ones left of our original platoon, and we kept together on board the transports."

He shuddered, then winced at the cigarette. He crushed it in the tray on his lap, but didn't light another.

"Mine sweeper either hadn't got them all or the ship went through the wrong channel or new mines had been laid. I don't know. All I remember is a loud noise, like thunder, and then the entire ship heaved to one side. People fell on each other, equipment broke loose, everybody screaming and shouting. Then another explosion and you could hear water rushing. I yelled to get topside and to the boats, but it was pitch dark, nobody could see. First I felt water around my ankles, then the boat heeled further and I got a mouthful of ocean. People grabbed hold of me, let me go, I tried to grab them, couldn't keep my grip. I flailed around in the dark. One more blast ripped through the ship and I felt myself bob to the surface and I could see stars. Stars and fire reflected on the water from behind me and I managed to turn around in time to see the transport go down."

"Jesus . . ."

"I went under, pulled down. I kicked and beat and finally made the surface again. Debris floated everywhere. A lot of it turned out to be bodies. But a lot of men survived. There was a shoreline northeast."

"What about your friends?"

"One. Somehow, I found one. Or he found me. I can't swim very well. In fact I was drowning when he grabbed onto me. I didn't know he was hurt. He had hold of a cushion from a jeep, no telling where that had come from. It supported both of us, though, and he held onto me and swam. I thought it was impossible. Too far. But it turned out to be closer than I thought. Too close. So our pilot *had* gotten his instructions wrong, he *had* sailed us into an unswept area. I realized later that we'd lost the convoy and drifted into Omura Bay, just north of the mouth of Ariake. I figured he was dead now anyway. We made the shore along Cape Nomo and my friend dragged me up. It was too dark, but I didn't see any lights anywhere. He pulled me to a line of trees and collapsed.

"In the morning I woke up to find my friend bleeding to death. I cut up my shirt for bandages, but there wasn't much I could do. I needed to find a medic or somebody. He begged me not to leave. 'Don't go,' he said, 'I'm afraid I won't be here anymore.'"

"'Anymore'?"

"Yeah, that's how he said it. I promised him I'd be back, that I had to go find help. He'd saved my life, damn if I was going to let him die. I remember him calling after me as I hurried up the beach. There were dead Americans washed up along the whole length. I saw a few huddles of survivors, but no medics. I kept going, north. No point going back until I'd made absolutely sure there weren't any medics. I ran.

"Then the whole sky lit up. I've never seen such a light. White hot steel, pearl, sunlight, all combined. I wasn't sure, but it seemed to start west of me. I fell in the sand and closed my eyes, but the light worked its way in anyway.

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I felt like my brain was melting. There were— I screamed, but it was drowned out by a sound like a hurricane."

He nervously shook out another cigarette and lit it carefully.

"When I opened my eyes again I was in a hospital room here in Honolulu. The war was over. I was a marine. I was told I'd been wounded on Okinawa, by a sniper. I never found my friend again."

"His name was Jeff?"

"Jeffrey."

"The war ended when we dropped the second atomic bomb on Nagasaki."

He nodded. "I know. It sits—sat—just across Omura Bay from us. I was running toward it when the . . . when it happened." He closed his eyes and shuddered. "It blinded God."

"What?"

"I checked after I got out of the hospital. There was no Jeffrey Lazar in the army. Never had been."

I thought about this for a long time. "Okay, let me see if I got this. You're telling me that the atomic bomb at Nagasaki made God—what?—blink?—and when he wasn't looking your friend disappeared?"

"No. Jeffrey didn't disappear. I did. I disappeared and turned up here."

I sat back, staring at him. "That's . . ."

"Nuts? Yeah." He shook his head. "I can't get over being here again. Brings it all back." He shrugged as if to shake something off his shoulders. "Forget it. Just stick with me till we get to Washington, all right? That's all." He tapped his bandaged skull lightly. "There're already too many holes in my existence. I don't want to slip through another one."

"But—"

"Once we get there, you can go your own way. Just consider this a crazy yarn some shell-shocked veteran told you."

Holes in existence. Yeah, well, I thought, there are holes in something.

But I couldn't get over the absolute conviction in his voice. There were things that *felt* true, even if it made no sense at all.

Gallo stretched out on the bunk and after a while he started breathing heavy. His color came back and I relaxed. But I couldn't sleep. I watched him. Maybe that had been his intention, telling me that story.

I won't be here anymore . . .

Next day we got on another Dakota and flew to San Diego. After a couple of days during which Gallo was looked over by more doctors and taken to dinner by a couple of generals and a senator, we boarded a train and headed east.

At Las Vegas, Nevada, we had a few hours' layover. The sky was cloudless and limitless. It didn't feel like January at all, at least not like January in Trenton. Certainly not like the November we left in Korea, where the temperatures had fallen to twenty below the week the Chinese attacked. I sat on a bench outside the depot with Gallo and thought how nice it would be to move here after my discharge and never be cold again.

Gallo hadn't said much after that night at Hickam, nothing at all about Operation Olympic, and I started to convince myself that he had been pulling my leg. That explanation didn't satisfy completely, but I thought if I worked at it hard enough I could eventually explain it all away. But I had thought about other explanations and I've since done a little research. Blinding God, Gallo called it. More like a hole torn open that he'd fallen through. More like a place where, for an instant or an hour, an exchange might be made.

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I don't like that much either, but over time I might be able to forget that, too.

"Nice town," he said.

"Yeah. I could settle here."

"Hmm. Too much gambling."

I got up.

"Where are you going?"

"Get us a couple of Cokes. Be right back."

He frowned at me but settled back on the bench, staring north into the clear air. I went into the little shop just inside the depot and asked the freckled girl behind the counter for two bottles. On the wall behind her was a big calendar with a photograph of Rita Hayworth. January 27, 1951. Not ten days ago we'd been in Japan, halfway around the world. A different world, I thought, all military and foreign. I still couldn't quite make it seem real to myself that we were home.

I stepped out the door—

—and the entire sky went stark white, hot and intense. I stood very still, counting. But the sound didn't come. I felt I'd just seen something I shouldn't. I closed my eyes, but too late, and when I opened them I was scared. And I remembered Gallo's description again, for the nth time since . . .

"Sir? Are you all right, sir?"

I opened my eyes and looked across at the young girl behind the counter. For a moment I didn't remember her. I thought she should have freckles. . . .

The door opened, jingling the bell.

"Jeff? Are you all right?"

When I looked around it was only Spencer, giving me his concerned face. It seemed strange to see his hair grey at the temples, but at least it hadn't fallen out like mine.

I leaned against the counter, arms trembling with the effort of holding myself up. I tried to smile at the poor girl, who watched me, pale and frightened. I must have scared her. I never know, really, when these spells will hit. This one wasn't very bad. I straightened up as best I could and drew a lungful of air. The pressure inside almost made me choke and I exhaled quickly.

"Sir. . . ?"

"I'm fine, thanks. How much for the Cokes?"

"You—you already paid."

"Oh. Well. Thank you."

Spencer came up beside me and took my arm. "Jeff?"

"I'm fine. Just a moment, there. I'm okay."

He picked up one of the cans and helped me back out into the passenger lounge and to the chair where my bags waited. I felt an instant of panic until Spencer lifted the briefcase to reassure me. I sat down and fumbled with the pop top on the can.

Spencer patted my hand.

"It's all still there?" I asked.

He nodded and opened the briefcase. "Everything. Official documents, discharge papers, environmental studies . . . the State Department records on Operation Ranger. Everything. All we need to do is see you get to Washington in one piece for the hearings."

I took a swallow of soda. It burned on the way down, but I could still keep it on my stomach. One more year and I might not be able to make the trip. One more year and I might be dead.

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"I still can't get over it," Spencer said. "Why you and not me? I went to Korea, you stayed stateside. I lived through a war zone, you're—"

"Dying from a bad idea?"

Spencer's eyes were bright, moist. "It's not fair."

"Fair has nothing to do with it." I reached into the briefcase and pulled out a file. "Operation Ranger. Detonation of an atomic bomb to determine survivability of men in the field." I opened to the list of units assigned to man the trenches dug miles from ground zero, squat there while a nuclear explosion tore at nature. My unit was near the top of the page, below the date. January 27, 1951.

They still denied that the cancer rate among us had anything to do with the test. After all, it was twenty-five years ago. I didn't expect them to listen to me any more than they had listened to the others, but at least the hearings continued and something good might come of it. Spencer sat with me all the way, babbling nervously, the way he always does under pressure. I tried to compose in my mind what I wanted to tell them. What I intended to tell them.

I couldn't tell them everything. I wanted to but they'd look at me like I'd gone crazy. They might attribute it to the cancer, finally getting to my brain and digging holes in it. What else can you expect from a man with a hole in his head? He'll tell you about his dreams and about things that never were, about the people he never sees again. I wanted to tell them about Gallo and what I do see in my dreams. All the faces. The countless faces, caught between hells, flat and bleached in the too-bright light. ❍

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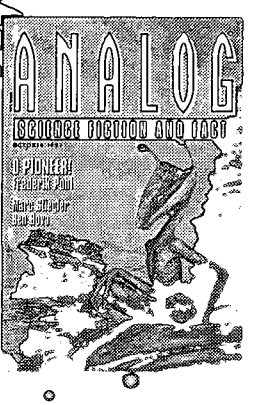

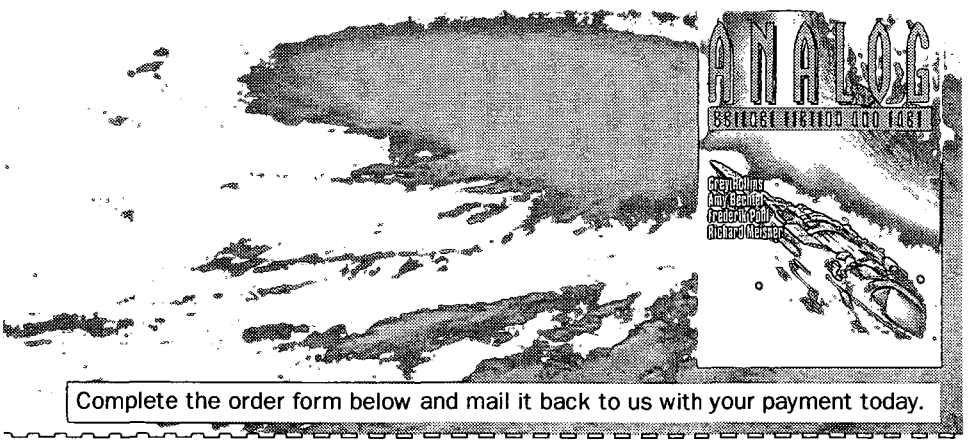

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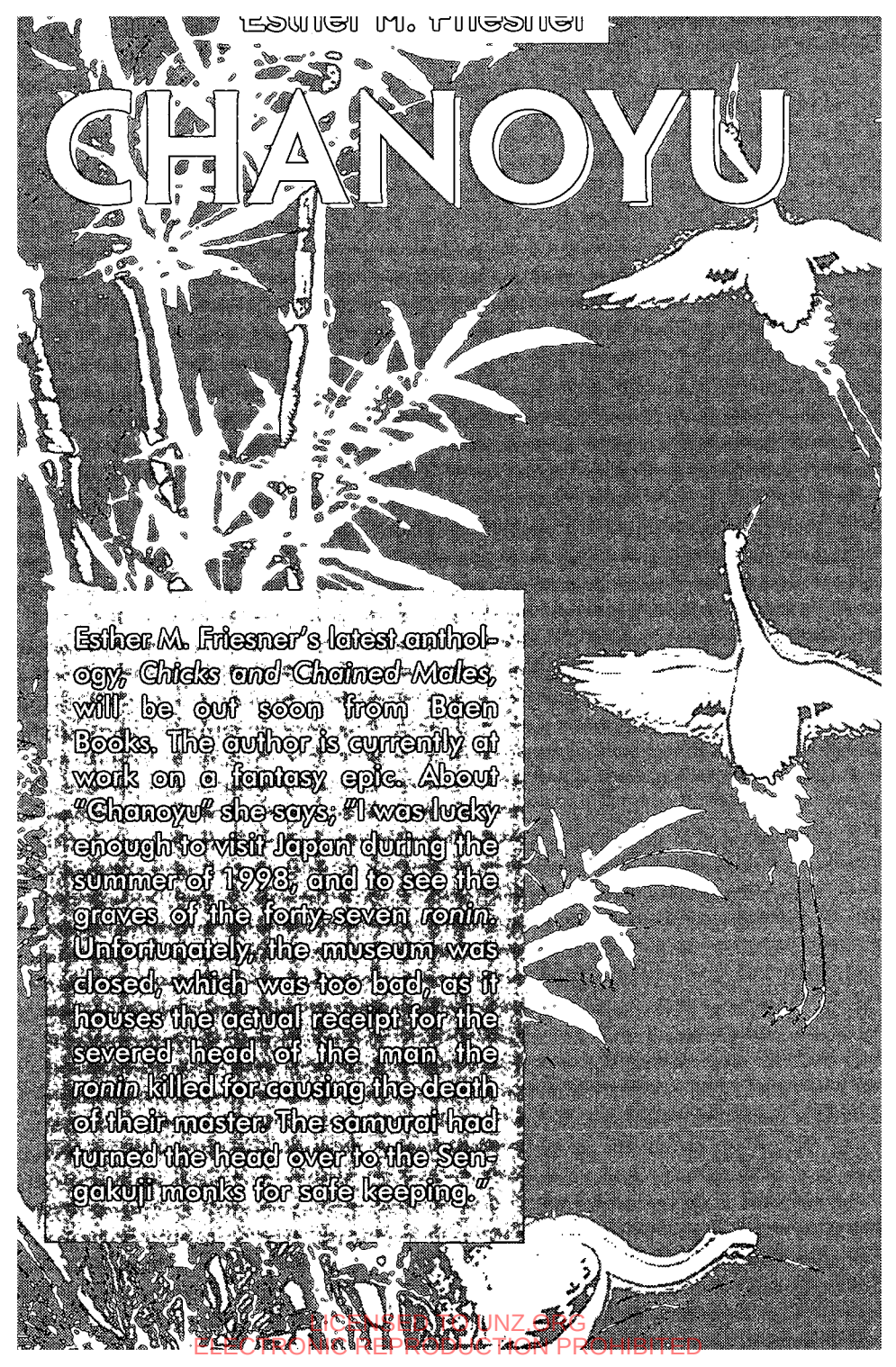
ESTHER M. FRIESNER

CHANOYU



Esther M. Friesner's latest anthology, *Chicks and Chained Males*, will be out soon from Baen Books. The author is currently at work on a fantasy epic. About "Chanoyu" she says, "I was lucky enough to visit Japan during the summer of 1998, and to see the graves of the forty-seven *ronin*. Unfortunately, the museum was closed, which was too bad, as it houses the actual receipt for the severed head of the man the *ronin* killed for causing the death of their master. The samurai had turned the head over to the Sengakuji monks for safe keeping."

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Today she was still Kamiko, because it pleased Matsukawa-*sama* to dress her in the old silk kimono that had been his grandmother's. The blue of the wave pattern matched the blue of her eyes, and the cranes with their glorious wings of gold and flame were the ideal foil to her matte-white skin and cataract of midnight hair. When they met like this, outside of working hours, Matsukawa-*sama* forbade her to put her abundant tresses up in any sort of restricting style, although he had given her hair ornaments as gifts, pins of the finest Kamakura lacquerware starred with pearls from Lake Biwa, and thin tortoiseshell combs inlaid with slivers of gold and jade.

It was cold in the *yoritsuki,* the waiting room of the teahouse. Kamiko could feel the intimation of a chill pass over her skin like the trailing cobweb sleeves of a ghost. No sound of preparation reached her ears from the *mizuya,* where by rights her "host" should now be readying the utensils he would use in the performance of the *chanoyu,* the tea ceremony to which he had bidden her.

Matsukawa-*sama* had been delayed—an understandable occurrence given the demands of business, although one that would irk him. He was a man always concerned with the faces of things. Kamiko knew that his lateness to the ceremony would irritate him more than the fact that his performance of the *chanoyu* was flawed before it was begun. Other hands than his had prepared the teahouse and the garden, bought hands had readied whisk and ladle, tea bowl, and the finely powdered *gyokuru* tea. The true tea master saw to all the preparations himself.

Most people would say that it was no insult at all for Matsukawa-*sama* to leave Kamiko here, waiting for him; no more than it would be an offense to allow the usual morning hour for turning on the coffeemaker to pass. He alone would view it otherwise, and his anger at himself would mar the serenity of the ritual. She did not wish this; not today.

For a few moments, Kamiko considered leaving the tea house until after he did arrive, thus assuming to herself all blame in the matter of the missed appointed hour. He would save face, and she—such things as face could not concern her. All that mattered was that the master be at ease.

Her life was his, his contentment the purpose of her existence. It was an arrangement as exquisite as a poem traced on a butterfly's wing, and as fragile. What she had done and must soon tell him would shatter it to dust. Therefore let her conserve for him the illusion of serenity for as many breaths as might remain to it, to her. To think was to act. She was on her feet and walking the garden paths almost before the last *Should I?* took form behind the perfectly painted mask of her face.

Cold sunlight striped the winding gravel pathways. Whip-thin willows bowed to brush their famished branches across the surface of the koi pond. The carved image of a tortoise, half-hidden among reeds, met Kamiko's abstracted glance with golden brown eyes and the ageless hauteur of moss-flecked stone.

You are so thoughtful tonight, Kamiko, so closed in on yourself. Will you let me in? A soft hand stole out of memory to stroke back one straying lock of Kamiko's thick black hair. Miyoko's teasing smile once more cast its sweet radiance down upon her where she lay among the deliciously rumpled sheets of their bed.

It's nothing, Kamiko heard her memory-self reply as she pushed herself up and out of bed. Naked, she padded across the carpet to the dresser that served them as a bedroom bar. There was a real bar, fully stocked, out in the

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sitting area of the suite, but she'd convinced Miyoko that it was more convenient to keep drinks close at hand so that they would not be inconvenienced no matter which room they used. Miyoko didn't require much persuasion. Already her pearly skin was taking on the sallow cast of one who wasted too much time believing that drink could offer refuge from unpleasant realities.

With her back blocking Miyoko's view of the Baccarat highball glasses and the bottle of Chivas, Kamiko paused for a moment, considering whether this might not be the best time to flick the little yellow pellet out from under her fingernail and into her lover's drink. The blinds were drawn, the room was dark, but outside it was still afternoon. There was no need to rush; Miyoko had reserved the suite for the entire week. The only constraint on their time together was Kamiko's fabricated job as an O.L., and even that gave them some leeway. As Miyoko herself said, who would dare utter a word against an Office Lady's absence when everyone knew it was done to accommodate the daughter of the Chairman of the Board?

I was just thinking . . . Kamiko paused, one hand encircling the neck of the scotch bottle. *You told your father that you wanted me to help you with your shopping before you go back to Sapporo. Shouldn't we buy something?*

Are you worried he'll care enough to demand evidence of how we've spent our time? Miyoko laughed. *My father is too busy to bother himself over that. He won't ask to see the packages, darling, and his secretary handles the bills so he won't notice if there are a hundred receipts or none.* She swung her legs from the bed and walked up behind Kamiko. *And if he should ask, I'll tell him that it's my vacation, after all, and that I changed my mind about wasting it on a shopping binge. Instead I chose to spend the two weeks in Tokyo sightseeing, with your capable help. You know he's so traditional, he thinks it's a terrible shame that I never took an interest in our illustrious past. But with your guidance, my dearest one*—Her hands stole up under Kamiko's arms to close over flawless breasts, her thumbs persuasively stroking the nipples, and her next words were a warm murmur against the silk of Kamiko's neck—*instead of shopping, I've made offerings at the chief shrines and burned incense on the graves of all the forty-seven faithful samurai buried at Sengakuji temple.*

She laughed again, and tried to draw Kamiko back to the bed, but Kamiko resisted. *You must not speak of them so lightly,* she told Miyoko. There was just the slightest hint of reproof beneath the timidity in her voice, an artful touch entirely in keeping with the image of the beautiful but humble O.L. who had attracted the notice of the Chairman's daughter. *They were loyal to their lord, even to death.*

Miyoko made a face. *They were fools! Loyalty to their lord, wanting to avenge his death—very well, I can forgive them that. If I told you half the people I've wanted to pay back—But the forty-seven knew they'd have to pay for their revenge with their own lives, afterward. Couldn't they have contrived to act secretly and live?*

Kamiko bowed her head, the proper gesture. *That would have been dishonorable.*

Only by the rules as they stood then. But to change the rules—! To anticipate that the rules will *change, that they* must *change—!* Glee transformed Miyoko's face into a mocking demon's mask. *Times change, and rules, and we can choose whether to sit like old priests, staring at lines raked into sand, or be the ones to cut the new patterns.*

There was a shrill, disturbing note in the young woman's voice. *This one*

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would make new patterns not with a rake, but with a sword, thought Kamiko, and carefully set the thought aside as an observation that Matsukawa-*sama* might find of use (or perhaps merely of interest; his, always his, to choose which) when he debriefed her at mission's end.

"As if she ever could have done so," Kamiko murmured to herself. Her *geta* crunched crisply into the gravel as she allowed the wandering garden paths to bring her where they would. "As if she ever truly held even the hope of a sword."

A soft sound made still softer by distance reached her ears, the muted hiss of a wooden door sliding open. Even here, so far from the tea house, she could hear it, and know that Matsukawa-*sama* had arrived and was noticing her absence. She had never been given any programming intended to simulate human imagination—yet what was imagination beyond memory, conjecture, and deduction? These three qualities she owned as surely as Matsukawa-*sama* owned her. Why should it still surprise her to realize that she had acquired the power to conceive possibilities? She found herself picturing his face as it went from vexation at his own unacceptably late arrival, to relief that there was none present to witness it, to renewed anger directed now at his undutiful slave.

Certainly Matsukawa-*sama* would not give any sign of his displeasure with her before the *chanoyu*. Preserving the tranquility vital to the proper performance of the tea ceremony was his paramount concern, even when his guest was also his property.

And when he hears my report? She turned her head away from the tea-house, her eyes resting on the scarlet leaves of a maple tree, a thousand papery little hands stretched out in supplication, imploring the fancied mercy of a waning sun. She attempted to engage her reasoning processes so that she might create a logical simulation of his rage when she confronted him, but every scenario that flickered behind her eyes seemed somehow inadequate.

It was time to turn back.

It was as she had foreseen: Matsukawa-*sama* greeted her with the gracious reserve and composure that usage dictated, making no reference to her absence from the *yoritsuki* on his arrival. Instead he chose to beg her pardon for the inadequacies of the ceremony that it would be his honor to perform for her.

Kamiko bowed and made a suitable reply. Words and gesture were no less perfect than they were automatic, her maker's legacy. *You cannot create, but you will preserve, and for this alone you were created.* Shinoda-*san*'s lined face was still as sharp as ever among her archived visual memories, even though it was the first of them all and had come when she wore the aspect of the beautiful boy-child Goro. The old scientist had also been a lover of the ancestral arts, and had seen to the adorning of his creation with as many of these accomplishments as might not interfere with Goro-Ume-Natsuko-Tadao-Yuzo-Fumiko-Haruo-Kamiko's primary function programming. If he had owned any rights to his shining treasure, no doubt he would have kept it by him to sweeten the few remaining years of his life with poetry, music, *ikebana,* calligraphy, and the rest.

Shinoda-*san* was dead, all of his creative genius diminished to ashes, exalted to memory. This too Kamiko preserved. Master to master, she had kept this one small place within herself apart, his image, his teachings, her shrine. And if she could not say why she still wandered with him there in all

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her changing guises, on inner paths of unchanging beauty, it did not matter: None knew that it was there, thus none had cause to ask her for reasons.

He was there now, in the sacred place within her, standing beside a stone lantern she had copied from the Toshogu shrine. She had taken her first memory of him, enhanced it, given it substance from a thousand other memories. Layer upon layer, she had given it beauty, as the oyster formed the pearl. Layer upon layer, she had lent it strength, as the master swordmaker at his forge doubled and redoubled the steel of a warrior's blade. While the body she presently wore followed Matsukawa-*sama* through the rituals of the *chanoyu,* her self in Goro's seeming raced forward to greet Shinoda-*san* with a child's innocent abandon.

He frowned when he saw the pretty boy come running up to him, as was to be expected. *Is this how I taught you to behave? Is this how you shame me?*

It was the same reproof that always began their meetings. Kamiko would no more have it otherwise than she would care to see the rigid ritual of the *chanoyu* desecrated. And yet . . .

On a garden path where wisteria bloomed, a beautiful boy fell to his knees and touched his forehead to the small white stones. *Lord, forgive me.*

This time. The old scientist allowed a smile to warm his eyes, though his lips remained downturned. *But you are too old for such childish behavior. You must learn.*

Yes. The boy touched his forehead to the stones once more, then sprang to his feet and bowed deeply. *Yes, honored teacher.*

Walk with me.

They walked through clouds of falling plum blossom and stands of snow-frosted pine, over paths of sand and gravel, earth and stone. The deep pink of summer lotus crowned the surface of cool black pools where white cranes waded, until crane and pool and lotus all whirled themselves away into the matchless bronze beauty of a single autumn chrysanthemum. The old man and the boy walked on, while all around them seasons swirled and bloomed and burst forth in their unnumbered glories, answering to no rule but loveliness.

At last, they came to a bench in the shade of a young willow tree. Here the old man sat with that same vague look of pain that Goro remembered and Kamiko preserved.

These bones, he said, by way of apology and explanation. *These are old bones.* This time, his smile brought up the corners of his mouth as well as kindling his eyes. *How I wish I were like you, child. You will never know the pain of age. Here, let me look at you.* And he did a thing which Shinoda-*san* had never done nor ever would have dreamed of doing while he lived: He cradled the boy's exquisite face in the palm of one wrinkled hand and held it as tenderly as if contemplating the priceless perfection of an antique teacup. *Ah. Other pains touch you, though, child. Still. Are they always there? Every time you visit me, you seem to bring fresh ones.*

I'm sorry, Lord.

You must not apologize for this. Go on. Tell me.

The boy hung his head. *This time you will hate me.*

The old man's hand came to rest on Goro's shoulder. *Can that word ever be spoken between us? You are my son, precious and beloved, all the children I will ever have, now. My death leaves only you behind, but you are enough, little son who carries all the sons and daughters of my dreams.*

Goro looked up, and in the teahouse Kamiko saw her first self's eyes like

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twin ghosts whose images rippled over the steam rising from Matsukawa-*sama*'s ladle as he scooped boiling water from the little iron pot. The water poured in a thin stream over the powdered tea, the whisk stood ready to beat it into green froth delicate and fragrant as the scented breath of heaven.

Goro slipped his small body from the bench beneath the willow tree and prostrated himself on the beaten earth of the garden path. *Lord, I have failed you, to my shame. As you gave me life, take it back again.*

Kamiko heard Shinoda-*san*'s measured, raspy breath flowing in and out of her head with a noise like a knotted string being drawn through cardboard. There was an empty teacup in her hand, a beautiful object. She gave it the admiration that the ceremony demanded, but her vision was consumed by the face of an old man, ashes in a shrine, the echo of whose living self was preserved only within the shell of metal and plastic that he had himself created.

If she died, *he* died.

Child . . . the word was spoken softly. *What have you done, to desire death so much?*

Lord, I do not desire death. My life is yours, I live so that you may live on in me.

I did not create you for that purpose. How did such an idea come to you?

Goro raised his face from the earth. Kamiko's hand reached up automatically to wipe from her own cheek a smear of tear-wet soil that wasn't there. Then she saw Matsukawa-*sama*'s critical eye upon her and remembered where she was.

Lord—Goro's voice was less than the whisper of a dream. *Lord, how could I not come to hold that thought when you created me to hold the seeds of it?*

A frown passed over Shinoda-*san*'s face. *You were made to contain and preserve viable germ plasm, to offer a favorable environment for fertilization, and in certain circumstances to incubate fertilized ova temporarily, until a human surrogate can be found. Have you failed in this?*

Goro lowered his eyes, beautiful, luminous, with lashes too long to be real because they were not. *In* this *purpose, Lord, I have succeeded too well.* He stressed the words just so, with deliberation.

What do you mean, child? The old man's eyes opened only a little wider. It was a true question. In Goro, in Kamiko, in all the other semblances Shinoda-*san*'s creation had assumed to satisfy the demands of each new assignment, Shinoda-*san* lived on as he had in life, a separate entity. He did not, as a matter of course, know all that Kamiko knew, simply because she carried him within her. Such an arrangement would deprive him of the independent being she had struggled to create, would in turn deprive her of his unaffected counsel. Of what use would their conversations be if he were only an extension of herself? What new wisdom could come from such self-defeating encounters? It would be an effort as sterile as pouring water into water and imagining one had created something new in the world.

Lord . . . the boy Goro was young, and, being young, he lacked the confidence to go on. Therefore he changed from being Goro into the first new seeming he had ever assumed: the young woman Ume, a form and face that Shinoda-*san* had thought more appropriate for performing his creation's projected purpose. Ume was an adult. She had left Shinoda-*san*'s laboratory to take up what should have been her life's work in the fertility clinic. She had seen and done much, and was not afraid to speak frankly:

Lord, you also made me to obey.

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Shinoda-*san*'s lips turned down once more, as they had when he reprimanded Goro. *What is this? Do you confess to disobedience? Impossible. You were not made so.* He words fell on her, short and sharp, like strokes of a bamboo cane.

No, Lord. Not by you. She wore a simple cotton *yukata,* a garment of function without much beauty. Her hair was cut short and straight across like a schoolgirl's, making her round face look rounder. Everything about her from her placid gaze to the comfortable width of her hips was intended to promise desperate people sons.

She took his hand in hers. In the outer world, where she was still Kamiko, the fingers of her right hand gracefully received the cup of tea that Matsukawa-*sama* presented to her, balancing it with elegant perfection on the palm of her left. Between the time she began her bow of thanks to Matsukawa-*sama* and the time she straightened her back again, her Ume-self had communicated to Shinoda-*san* all that had been done to her since her purchase from the clinic. She had never seen the need to tell him such things until now.

Changes? The old scientist's face was as stiff as if some evil spirit of the snows had forced it into a mask of ice.

Modifications, Ume said softly. *That is what my new employer calls them. That and . . . improvements.* She could not meet Shinoda-*san*'s eyes when she said that.

She only looked up when she heard him murmur, *Better if I had taken you with me into the flames when I died. Better still if my Goro had lived. He would not have let anyone do this to you. He would have bought you back. If not that, then I know he would have found some way to use the law to prevent this . . . obscenity. He was a clever child. He would have been a great man.*

Ume's eyes shimmered with tears that were only thoughts. *Am* I *not your Goro?* She could hardly believe she had dared to speak those words.

Shinoda-*san*'s anger-hardened mask melted only a little way back into flesh. *He was the child of my body. You are the child of my mind, of my hands. I do not think you could ever come to know how deep a difference this—*

He is dead, Lord. Kamiko's anger shook Ume's body in the inner garden where lingering memories tended the blossoms and wandering thoughts raked the paths. *Dead, gone, and little more than a child when he died. And I am here. I preserve you better than he ever would . . . or could. Why then do you exalt him over me? You call me your precious son, but only when I wear his seeming. Am I not dear to you as myself? Why do I see that hungry light in your eyes when you speak his name? I recognize it. I know it. I have seen its like too many times warming the faces of Matsukawa-*sama*'s clients.*

For the first time before or since his death, Shinoda-*san*'s face revealed uncertainty when his creation was there to see it. *What do you mean, child?*

In the teahouse, Kamiko's throat felt the trickle of tea. The documents that Matsukawa-*sama* owned concerning her capabilities stated that the android's senses were nowhere near fully human, yet some might argue the same for others born mortal. Without a finely developed sense of touch, she could not fulfill her purpose. If Matsukawa-*sama* ever learned that she could feel the tea on her lips, in her throat, it would not surprise him. If Matsukawa-*sama* ever learned what *else* she could feel, he would be too appalled to be surprised.

Child, Ume echoed. *You call me child, your child, but you could as readily call me table, turtle, stone. For you, for me, it is only a word. What good is an-*

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other word to me? I have tried to honor you, to serve your memory as faithfully as my duty and my love demand. What I have done—the offering I have made to you—will destroy me. For what? I am less to you than a little container of bone chips and ashes you hold in your heart.

How can you hope to understand? The old scientist shook his head. *What my son was to me—*

I, who have taken every pain to preserve you as you were, how can I *not understand?* Willow leaves shadowed Ume's eyes. *I who hold you within me, shelter you, cherish you as you are, when it would be so easy for me to remake you so that your love for me is perfect, how can* I *not understand what it is to love a child?*

It's not the same.

Oh, I agree. I have seen what it truly means to be a child of the body. It makes me rejoice that you are all the father and all the child I may ever have.

Shinoda-*san*'s face darkened. *You won't put me off with riddles, Ume,* he declared. *You will answer me. What has this man* truly *done to you? This goes beyond the "modifications" you've specified. You are no longer as I made you. Why?*

And Ume threw her head back, and laughed, and became Haruo, who was little more than sixteen, and who looked handsome the way a starving tiger on the prowl is handsome, and just a little dangerous.

Don't you mean how do I dare not be the kid you thought *you had?* he jeered at the old man. *Same as the rest of them. When I popped out between my mother's bloody thighs you thought you had it licked, didn't you?* Didn't you? *Yeah. A child of your body, that's right: A son to carry on your name, a daughter to carry on your blood. Only I wasn't born to give you what you expected, all that crap you thought was part of your* rights *as my father. What the fuck good was I if I'd only take your name so far down the path and then drop it in the dirt? Hey, Dad, I've got a* biiiig *surprise for you: Your little* boy *doesn't like little* girls. *And your little boy's the only kid you're ever gonna get out of Mom, and it doesn't matter how much money you're willing to pour out before the gods: The dynasty stops here.* He struck his chest hard with his fist. *End of the line, old man, end of the line.*

In the teahouse, Kamiko's face showed nothing but peace. Inside her head, her old Haruo mask strutted boldly before Shinoda-*san*'s horrified image, all black leather and tight bluejeans, crowing like a cockerel.

One time the boss took me out with him to a bar when I looked like this, Haruo said, eyes narrow and foxy-bright. *A test run, like I was a car. He wanted to see whether I'd been revamped good enough to attract his latest client's son. Attract? Ha! It went* way *past that the minute they saw me. Man, I* had *them: Every eye in the place right on me, right here.* This time he only tapped his chest, but he let his glance slip slyly down to his crotch so that it was impossible for Shinoda-*san* to mistake his meaning. *Those other times when my job was to snag one of the pots, I played it meek and pretty, but we knew that wouldn't do for Yamamura-*san*'s son. He liked them tough. Not* too *tough, though—he was a pussy underneath all that expensive leather Daddy's money bought him—just tough enough for him to pretend he had the balls to be a* real *bad boy. Want to know the "modifications" Matsukawa-*sama *had his trained monkeys put into me for* that *job? And there's more where those came from. As long as there's money to pay the monkeys and old men to pay Matsukawa-*sama*'s price for grandsons, there'll always be more.* Haruo's laugh was a crow's harsh cry.

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The laughter faded away. Within herself, Kamiko painted the image of a crow taking flight from a pine bough and winging off toward the garden's imagined horizon. On the stone bench, Shinoda-*san* sat with head bowed.

Why could you not have left me dead? he asked.

Haruo froze at the old man's voice, shook himself like a poorly tracked videotape, refocused as Tadao, still handsome but softer, gentler, wearing the pristine uniform of a schoolboy. He sat beside the old scientist and softly said, *Because I could not go on in that life alone. Because I needed you to be with me, a refuge. Because the thing I do now to serve the one who owns me is like acid in my skull, scouring away all memories but the worst, those that most trouble me.*

Memories? The old man's eyes caught once more the light of speculation. Tadao had still been Goro, Shinoda-*san* had still been alive the last time such a look had illuminated the scientist's face. A thousand doors opened, offering glimpses of a universe where all things were possible. *You have* troubling *memories?*

Tadao did not answer. His thoughts flew back to the clinic, to the time when all he had needed to be was Ume. Memories overwhelmed him, swarming with countless portraits of human indignation, revulsion, even rage, all of these collected and focused on the ever-repeated moment when Ume's human colleague had explained to the child-hungry couples precisely what Miss Ume was and what she must do with both wife and husband if they wished to conceive. Ume sat placidly and heard herself called *unthinkable, revolting, monster, obscenity*. But in time they all calmed down and permitted her to do her job. There was nothing a human would not do to have a child of his or her own blood. Nothing.

What she had done to them, with them, was what she had been created to do. She had been surprised, at first, by how violently the clients reacted when they learned exactly how she would give them what they craved. She had always owned the potential to shift shape, to modify her own size and sex and seeming as need demanded. Shinoda-*san* had given her that function to meet the specifications which the clinic considered necessary. Sometimes the wife was not to blame for failure to conceive; sometimes the husband's sperm was vigorous but he was not. A proper go-between must be employed, a transfer must be made, one that required Shinoda-*san*'s creation to gather seed as a woman, then to pass it on as a man. It was her duty, the harvesting of eggs, the gathering of sperm, the incubation until such time as a human surrogate could be found, or, in cases where the trouble was not with the client's womb, until the mother might receive the transplanted embryo.

And they came back, the same people who had cursed and cried out in disgust and called her an abomination. They came back with their fat, round-faced babies and gave her their blessings.

If you teach a child the same lesson over and over, time after time, even one of the slowest wit will retain it, Tadao said. *I was not created to lack intelligence. Once, when Matsukawa-*sama *brought me to an interview with an American, the man said that a chicken was just an egg's way of making another egg. He behaved as if he had said something very clever because it was something that Matsukawa-*sama *might not understand, and yet he would be forced to smile and nod as if he did. But I understood. The American's daughter did not desire men. She was the sole child of his body; he could have no more, because his wife was old, and he was used to her, and divorce would be more costly than hiring me. To seduce his daughter, I became Fumiko. The*

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American girl was unpleasant to be with, harsh, evil-tempered, cruel; it was a blessing that she would never have children of her own to torment. I have often wondered, since then, how much of her ugly disposition came from knowing she had failed her parents by the very act of being born as she was.

You . . . have wondered? Shinoda-*san* regarded Tadao closely. *Without being directed to do so? Is this another of your master's modifications?*

Tadao seemed not to hear the question, although that was impossible. He continued speaking as though Shinoda-*san* had said nothing at all: *After I had drugged her and removed enough eggs to ensure that at least one embryo would result, I came back to him to learn where I was to harvest the sperm that would give him the grandchild he demanded. He laughed and stripped away his clothes and showed me.* A chicken is just an egg's way of making another egg, *he said again while he grunted over me. It was then I first became aware that I would not be unhappy if his sperm was inadequate to the task, or if the implantation failed, or if his wife utterly refused to accept the child when it was placed before her for adoption, or if that child too grew up after the way of his daughter, for there are no guarantees that—*

What has this to do with memories? the old man broke in. *You were not made to think or to judge or to wonder, but to* do; *you were certainly not made to* question *what you do, nor to follow the path that confusion lays before your feet. Child, what has become of you?*

In the teahouse, the *chanoyu* was coming to an end. As she had been taught, Kamiko requested to examine the implements that Matsukawa-*sama* had used to prepare the tea. Suitable words of admiration for their beauty and simplicity came from her lips. Throughout her praises, Matsukawa-*sama* retained a well-cultivated look of modesty.

I have become the child whose chosen way is bitterness to the one who gave me life, Tadao said. As he had done when he was Goro, now Tadao too crouched in the dust at Shinoda-*san*'s feet and pressed his forehead to the earth. *I regret to tell you that this is how I am, my teacher, my lord. I do not know how this came to be, but I do not regret that it is so—only that it will displease you. For once I became aware of what I did, once the path of troubling thoughts lay before me, I followed it. It was paved with questions like stepping stones over swiftly rushing waters. I followed each to the next, though the way became more perilous. I gazed down into the waters and saw in them the racing images of those who had come to me because their hearts hungered for the children of love, but I also saw reflected there the faces of those old men whose only hunger was for their own immortality. How easy to see the difference! And what a true abomination that I, being what I am, should do so. I am not human: This difference should have meant nothing to me, but it did. It did, and because it did, I could not help but follow the path of the stones.*

Where has it brought you, child? Shinoda-*san* spoke as one who did not want to hear the answer but who could not refrain from asking the question.

To refusal. (In the darkened hotel bedroom, Kamiko gazed down on Miyoko's drugged sleep. She had already brushed the young woman's abdomen with disinfectant, deployed the instruments, prepared herself to receive the eggs. What she had to do, she had done many times before, at the behest of many clients, at her master's command. It was almost a sacrament, a ritual task whose steps were as clearly prescribed and defined as any tea ceremony.)

To death.

The *chanoyu* was over. Kamiko and her proprietor left the *sukiya* sepa-

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rately, only to meet again almost immediately outside. It was here that Matsukawa-*sama* at last asked her for her report.

"Is that all?" he asked when she was done.

Kamiko bowed. "I have failed you, my master. I did not complete my task." She kept her eyes fixed on the ground. "I could not."

"Ah." He nodded. "Come." And that was all he said. He started along the path that led away from the *sukiya*. Dutifully she followed, in silence and in fear.

What will he do with us? Tadao was Goro again. The little boy slipped his fingers into his creator's hand.

I do not know. Shinoda-*san* gave the plump fingers a tender squeeze, as if the gesture had the power to drive out demons. *Are you afraid?*

I do not fear my own death. I mourn yours. You did not choose this.

Shinoda-*san* smiled. *No more than I chose my birth. And do you now regret your path, your choice?*

Only for your sake, my lord.

Why? My existence ended long ago. The world believes me dead. Only you know that I am here, within this place of your creation. What difference will it make if I depart?

The little boy looked away. *It will make a difference to me, lord. I love you.*

Shinoda-*san* let go of Goro's hand and stroked the child's smooth cheek with his bony knuckles. *Do you know, little one, that there are wise scientists, men of learning and brilliance, who would tell me that it is impossible for one like you to love, or choose, or sense the difference between what you did in the clinic and what you can no longer do for your master?*

Yes. The child's lips trembled.

And do you now regret having chosen, having loved?

No.

Then regret nothing. Fear nothing. You are my child. I've heard your protests, how you insist that I hold you less dear than my lost son. Yet I tell you I do love you as well and as much as I ever loved him. Differently, yes, but with the difference that exists where a man has been blessed with two children to cherish instead of only one. And you are *my child: More than anything, I do not want you to be afraid.*

In the outer world, Kamiko got into her owner's car. Matsukawa-*sama* was saying something. Kamiko carefully recorded it for future review. He asked no questions, therefore he did not expect any reply from his property. Most likely he had had enough of her responses for a time. The sound of his words detached from any meaning was as restful to her ears as the whisper of water trickling over smooth stones. She hardly noticed the moment when the car reached its destination and he ordered her out.

As she walked behind him through the bright halls, she found the slick, hard surfaces around her changing as she herself owned the power to change. Hurrying people in crisp white coats turned into unhurried rocks, wind-eaten, moss-grown. The ruler-straight path of shining black floors became the meandering gray and gold of sand combed into swirling patterns by a snub-toothed wooden rake.

Shinoda-*san* sat with her on a flat rock colored like a raincloud. Because he had told her not to be afraid, she had become Kamiko for his eyes as well as for Matsukawa-*sama*'s. Even now she could not believe she had become someone as brave as Kamiko.

So now it ends, she said. *It can't be much longer. He's not taking me up-*

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stairs to his office. This is the part of the building that holds the laboratories. He's brought me here to be destroyed.

Shinoda-*san*'s face was calm, holding serenity as simply and easily as a cup held tea. *I don't think he will destroy you,* he said.

Why not? He can make another to take my place. He purchased your design specs when he acquired me.

He can. He might. But will he? You were not cheap to make, and I know that my former employers would not surrender the rights to my design without securing an impressive profit. Shinoda-*san* smiled. *You are an investment. Your owner doesn't destroy such things.*

But I've changed. I'm no longer the tool he needs. Why should he preserve the device that does not answer to its master's will?

Another question. Shinoda-*san* passed his hand over the patterned sand. The ripples moved, flowed, melted into water's living glass. The great rocks shattered, scattered themselves across the pool, stepping stones that failed to bridge the banks. Kamiko found herself alone, balanced precariously on the stone nearest shore. She could not explain how she'd come to be there any more than she could explain how she'd come to see the outer world through questioning eyes. The rock beneath her feet was slick with rotted water weeds, arched like a turtle's back, but the distance between stone and land was too great for her to leap. If she tried, she would fall.

Where have your questions brought you, child? Shinoda-*san* called softly from the bank.

Too far, Kamiko whispered miserably, hugging herself tight.

When the traveler goes too far on his chosen path and turns back to face the way he has come, has he still gone too far or not far enough?

I—She could not find the words or the time to answer. Shinoda-*san*'s riddle reached her just as her foot touched a bloom of slime and skidded off the rock. She pitched forward, arms spread like a crane's wings, seeking to embrace the shore. The water fell up to meet her, a pool, a curtain, a ghost whose face was all the kindness she had ever known.

She landed in a shock of light that was the world, her thought-gardens torn away. She was in a small room with all manner of diagnostic tools ranged against one wall and a gurney with no mattress waiting against another. Matsukawa-*sama* was there, his face flanked by the faces of the white-coated demons. There were four of them, the number of death, all bespectacled, grave young men with lips so thin that Kamiko imagined a god cutting open the flesh of their faces with a razor's edge.

Matsukawa-*sama* was speaking. The words floated out to reach her: "—another try, afterward" burst like fish-blown bubbles from the surface of a pool just as Kamiko sensed the intruding jab of the probe at the base of her skull, and then more than darkness.

Waking came back to her as a ceiling slashed with fluorescent lights. She was still Kamiko. She sat up on the worktable and saw the four young men waiting for her, one with a palmtop, one with a laptop, one tidying away the tools, one holding out a crisp blue-and-white *yukata* patterned with the company logo for her to wear.

"The tests have all run satisfactorily," he told her as she slipped her arms into the sleeves and tied the belt around her waist. He nodded to where a pair of *tabi* and sandals waited. "We have already informed Matsukawa-*san* of this; he's pleased. He wants you in his office immediately for instructions."

Kamiko sat down on a cold metal chair to put on the thin socks, the straw-

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soled sandals. It was impossible for her to feel dizzy, and yet when she bent down to pull the *tabi* over her bare feet she almost tumbled out of the chair. The grim young man was there to catch her, his colleagues to make hasty notes. She met his concerned frown with a smile and was quick to get to her feet and out the door.

"I know the way," she said pleasantly, leaving them.

Matsukawa-*sama*'s office was beautiful, black and gray and gold. She lived there, when she was not working, in a place between the stand that held his swords and the brass and rosewood rod on which he hung his grandmother's kimono when he did not order her to wear it. The kimono was back there now, on display against the wall.

"I have just spoken with our client," was how Matsukawa-*sama* greeted her. "I begged for his forgiveness and promised him unconditional success this time. He has graciously consented to allow us a second chance. Of course this means you will have to travel to Sapporo. You leave tomorrow. I want you to change your appearance entirely—go younger, I think, but not *too* young. Keep nothing that might remind her of you as she knew you. Her father tells me that the girl went back home in a black mood. She wouldn't say why, but I think we know: You abandoned her without a word of goodbye, and she could find no trace of you in her father's office. A woman scorned, eh?" He smiled, pleased with himself, his world.

Kamiko bowed. "I will initiate the changing routines immediately," she said, and by the time she lifted her head again, her eyes were already brown instead of blue. Her hair shrank back into her head, began to go pale, ending as a sharp, short, hedgehog cut bleached white as bone. The underlying planes of her face shifted, carving deep hollows in her cheeks, giving her the feral, fascinating look of a female Haruo.

Matsukawa-*sama* frowned. "Too different. Work on something else." He waved her away, dismissing her to her niche in the wall. Soon he was on the telephone and she was forgotten.

While Kamiko played idly through all the changes of which her body was capable without recourse to the lab, her thoughts stole away joyfully to the garden. The willow tree stirred in the breeze and there was the scent of summer-ripe plums on the air. In this place, she did not need the white-coated demons to help her alter her adult body to child size. She could become Goro at a thought. The little boy raced along the white path. He knew how strictly Shinoda-*san* would reprimand him for such uncontrolled behavior, but he didn't care: He was happy to be alive.

He called out the old man's name as he ran, feeling his cheeks grow red, his hair lift in the wind. *Lord! Lord, you were right, he* didn't *have me destroyed! Here I am! Here I am!* Down the white path he ran, calling, calling, laughing because everything was going to be all right after all.

And next time you refuse to do what your owner bids you? The question sounded hollow, words without a human voice, carrying the twang and echo of a machine.

The child stopped short at the sound. *Lord, where are you?*

Or have you determined to go back the way you came?

Lord? The boy was shivering now. He gazed around the garden. It was not as he recalled it. The foliage was the uniform green of a child's crayon drawing, the flowers were sharp-edged as if they had been etched by a sword. *Father?*

There was no answer; not even the voice of the machine.

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In the alcove in Matsukawa-*sama*'s office, Kamiko froze in mid-transformation, giving her face the aspect of a stroke victim's. Within herself, the white paths crumbled, the willow's tender leaves curled to the brown husks of abandoned insect shells, and shadows came creeping out of all the empty places where he had once dwelled. She doubled over like a woman in the throes of miscarrying the child she already loved.

"*Father!*"

Matsukawa-*sama* glanced up from his work. "Did you say something?" He scowled when he saw her. "What are you up to? I hope that's not a joke, that face," he said, jerking his chin at her. "It's hideous, an abomination. Is something still wrong with you? The techs assured me that they'd removed a massive anomaly from your programming and that your normal behavioral routines should reintegrate themselves around the excision within hours. If you're exhibiting signs of humor, though, I doubt the excision was complete." His hand reached for the intercom. "I'll send you back to the laboratory at once. We can't risk a second failure. With the profits from this assignment, we'll finally have the assets to begin constructing—"

"No." She stepped out of the alcove and was across the room in a breath, her hand flashing between his own and the intercom so quickly that he jerked back out of reflex, taken by surprise. She looked so human that it was easy even for him to forget that she owned more than human strength, more than human speed. "Be assured: The excision was complete. He's gone."

"'He'? What do you—?" Matsukawa-*sama*'s question withered on his tongue. He saw what she had plucked from the place beside her alcove even as she had raced across the room. He stared at her in horror, and his last breath braided with the whisper of the sword as it left its scabbard. She did not know what her face looked like as she drew back the blade, but she hoped that it would prepare his mind for hell.

In the shade of the great trees of Sengakuji Temple, the graves of the forty-seven samurai sent up the twisting wraiths of burning incense. It was late in the day. The old man who tended the portal and who sold bundled incense to those who would honor the loyal dead was about to close up his gatehouse and go home when he saw the girl. She wore a simple blue-and-white *yukata,* and she was seated in an attitude of contemplation at the grave of the youngest of the forty-seven. He could not remember whether or not he had seen her come in.

He went up behind her and politely told her that it was time to leave. Her eyes stayed shut, her face a mask as young as a newly opened blossom, as peaceful as the moon. He spoke to her again, and again received no answer. When he dared to touch her shoulder, he found that she was cold.

It was only after the police arrived that anyone paid attention to the cloth-wrapped bundle lying before the place where she had been. It was a good thing that the police were the ones to open it.

Everyone asked who she was. No one knew what she was until later, and then no one knew how such a thing as she could ever die. And no one ever knew why the photograph of an old man and a little boy in a lost garden had been left there on the grave, wrapped within the bundle that held the face of neither one. ○

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ALLIES

"Allies" is Miriam Landau's first story for *Asimov's*. Inspiration for the tale came from Maureen and Jinnet Jee, and from Jim Klavetter who taught her to rock climb. "Unlike Nathan in this story, Jim was always gentle and encouraging. I'm sorry he died before he could see the story in print."

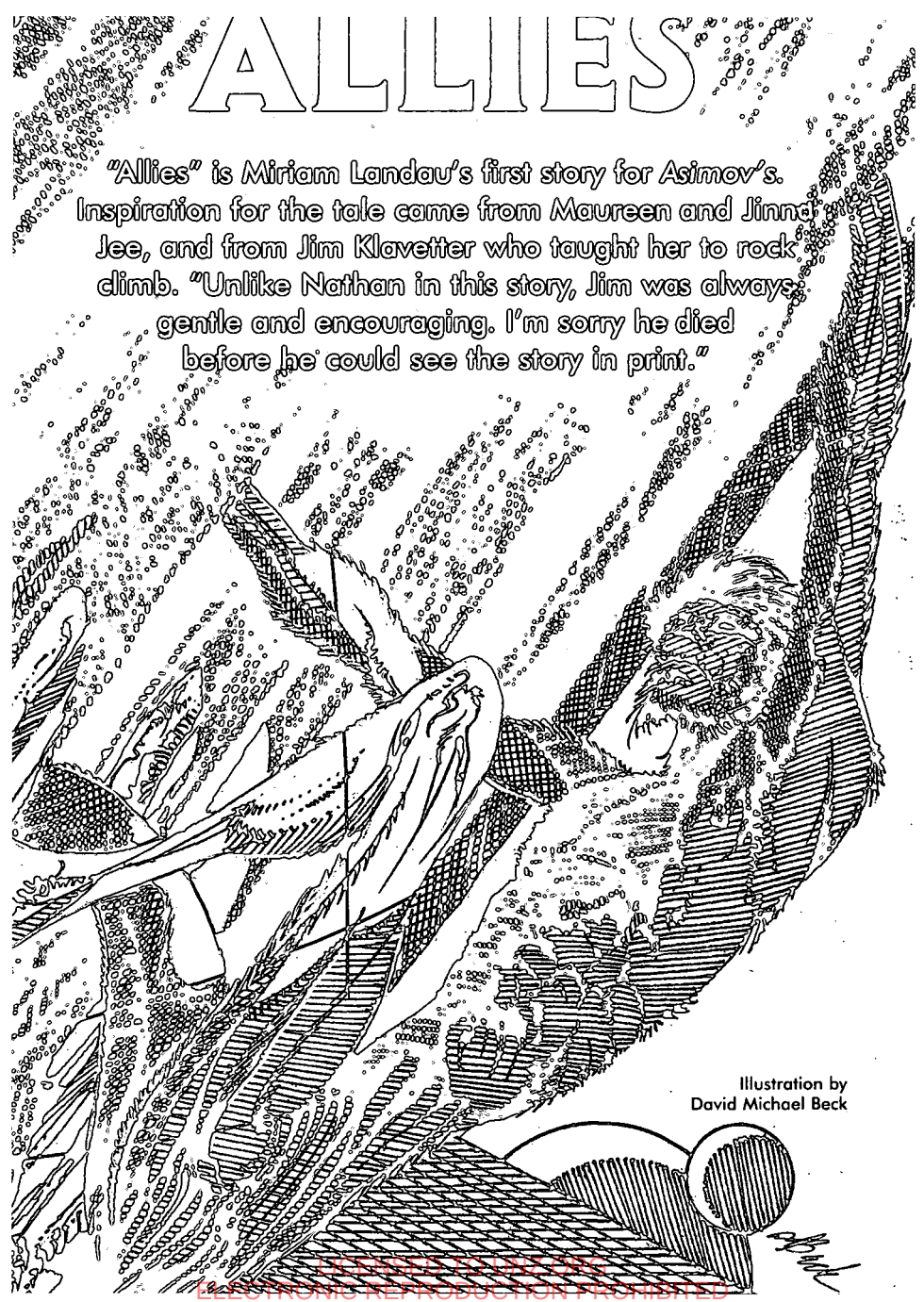

Illustration by
David Michael Beck

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ing left to anchor him and he blew away.

But I'm still here, Sarah thinks, why am I still here? Kailas is too far from Earth for trade, too far for war, too far for anything but curiosity, and that was something between Martas and Nathan that had nothing to do with her. The cliff looms over her, three thousand feet of alien granite; in the gray light before dawn, she imagines Kailan faces grimacing in the rock, their three-fingered hands curled into their striking gesture that means go away, go away.

She wishes she could. Damn Nathan for leaving her to climb alone. Her chest still hurts, the last vestiges of the virus. They said it would stop hurting, but they didn't say when.

At least it's still cool. The Kailans prefer to climb at dawn and dusk. Sometimes Martas says this is for coolness, sometimes se says it is for prayer. Sometimes se simply snaps ser head toward ser left shoulder, the Kailan shrug, as if to say, it's what we do. The Kailans call the cliff The Little Wall.

None of them have spoken to her today, not even Martas. In the dimness she can't distinguish them from each other, spindly bodies huddled over climbing gear like scrub over talus. It's only when they move that they become individuals: Martas, agile but slowing, like an aging athlete; Shree, lithe and delicate, even for a Kailan; Emmine, awkward, cumbersome, but the only Kailan strong enough to carry the haul bag alone; and Racha, dignified and deliberate, slow moving as a monk. Racha wears no climbing harness. A traditionalist, Martas had said. Se belays in the old way, prepared to catch a falling climber with ser own weight and the friction of the climbing rope wrapped around ser torso and thigh.

Sarah struggles into her own harness, feet shaky in the coarse dun sand. Her fingers won't work. She has to sit to fasten the harness, wipes her hands on her shirt three times before she can force the waist strap to double back through its buckle. She is clipping on her chalk bag when Martas motions to her. She doesn't understand the gesture; it isn't until she has come close enough to see Emmine's fingers curling that she realizes Martas wants her to leave the bag. Martas and Emmine are snapping at each other, arguing too fast for Sarah to follow. She wipes her hands against her shirt again; it's already damp. She knows the Kailans climb clean, leave no pitons on the mountain, but she can't climb without chalk. The argument peaks; then Emmine turns ser back to Martas, saying, "*You* climb with the *gleuft*."

They watch Emmine's retreat, the Kailans carefully not looking at Sarah. Racha breaks the silence, ruffling through the gear pile, sending carabiners clattering against the stones. *Gleuft* is the first slang everyone on the station learns. It means cleft, divided, torn. And originally, to be broken by a fall from a high place. The language remembers the punishment, though in common use only the curse remains. Like the word *faggot* once meant: a bundle of sticks to be burned.

"I'm sorry," says Sarah. I'm sorry I have five fingers and my palms sweat. I'm sorry I have only one sex. I'm sorry I lived and Nathan died. Out loud she says, "I won't use the chalk."

Martas asks in English, "Will you be able to climb?"

She wonders if she's allowed to say no. Martas and Nathan worked for

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months to win permission for humans to climb. "It's something between prayer and golf," Nathan had said, dark hair rumpled as the sheets he lay in. "Everybody in their government practices, though only a few of them still believe."

She had just gotten out of their bed. He was still lying there watching her. "If we can prove we can climb, we have a chance of acceptance here," he had said, one hand idly rubbing the hair on his stomach. "They'll have to decide we can't really be *gleuft,*" he had added, laughing, "since everyone *knows* the *gleuft* can't climb." He was fine then; a week later he was gone. I don't care if they accept us, she thinks, but the dead can't change their minds. She shrugs at Martas, drops her chalk bag into the pile with the Kailans' extra gear.

Martas bundles the unneeded gear together. "Emmine doesn't really care about the chalk," se says conversationally, "se just hates humans."

Don't you all? Sarah wonders. But she remembers Martas mimicking Nathan's stance, as if se were trying on his body, trying to learn what it would mean to see only one side of things. She wishes she knew. Martas stashes the bundled gear into a hollow between two rocks. "Then why is se here?" Sarah asks.

"Emmine thinks Racha can learn to tolerate you," Martas says. "Se would prefer that didn't happen." Se burbles Kailan laughter. "I'm bad enough," se says, "but I'm young and foolish and don't have Racha's power base." Racha's domain is science, education, and religion, Martas explains. Emmine's responsibilities are more daily: roads, sewage, family care. Martas adds that se serself works for communications and coordination, though Sarah knows this.

They walk the rest of the way to the cliff in silence, meet the others at the base of the climb. Racha has given Emmine ser climbing rack, a thin strip of webbing worn over one shoulder, draped with the gear climbers place for protection. Sarah imagines Emmine is taking the lead to get as far away from her as se can. Shree stands a little apart from them, darting glances around ser, mostly at the rock but sometimes at Sarah.

Sarah thinks Shree is Martas's assistant. She had seen ser only once at the station, at the party to celebrate the permits for the climb. Se had been a silent figure at Martas's shoulder throughout the dinner and speeches, but when the music started, se had slid through the crowd to the transparent wall of the viewport. Kailas was swollen tan and red at ser feet, and everywhere else there was only stars. Though no one else was dancing, se had leapt against the night, embracing a partner no one could see.

"Shree," Martas had asked, "would you like to climb with us?"

Shree hadn't answered, had slipped back into Martas's shadow. But now se is here, bent at the waist and circling ser fingers in the sand, a shadow of ser dance that might be Kailan stretching.

Racha steps to the cliff and the others follow. Sarah waits behind. She half expects Racha to sing, but se only lays ser hands against the rock and stands still, Martas and Shree behind ser. Emmine checks the closure on the haul bag, then ties into the rope.

When Racha is done with the prayer, se nods to Emmine; Emmine strolls to the cliff and steps lightly up the face, as if climbing a ladder that vanishes before Sarah can see it.

"Emmine has no style," says Martas, "but se's very strong."

No style, thinks Sarah. I can't do this. She had expected to count on her strength in this lighter gravity, but instead she feels listless and dizzy, her

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heart banging ineffectually against her breastbone. The cliff rears above her, nothing like the short climbs she did with Nathan in Joshua Tree on Earth, or her training in the station's gym. She is going to be squashed between the cliff and the sand and the alien sky. The Kailans are right. She is broken; there is nothing in her that wants to climb.

"We'll climb over here," says Martas. Se leads them to a wide crack, one edge jutting past the other, as if shifted along a fault line and not simply weathered. Even on Earth it would be a beginner's climb. Martas whistles the Kailan belay calls for her: once for safe, twice for climbing, three short ones for stop or help. "We don't usually need them for a simple climb like this," se says, "But I thought . . ."

Se doesn't finish ser sentence. It's okay, thinks Sarah, I know humans can't climb. Martas flits ser wispy fingers over Sarah's harness, checks that the thin Kailan rope runs properly through her belay device. Then se touches her face. Sarah is startled, tries not to draw back. Martas's fingers are cool, the pads a little rough. Ser claws are clipped radically short for a government official. "I'm sorry Nathan isn't here," se says. Sarah doesn't know if Martas means for her, for serself, or for the climb; she can only nod and gesture at the cliff: climb, climb, he isn't here, he isn't coming.

Martas climbs with a syncopated rhythm, as if singing to serself, something light and silly. Se doesn't bother with protection. At 120 feet, a long first pitch, se stops, anchors to the cliff for the belay stance, and whistles once.

This is insane, thinks Sarah. She reroutes the rope through her harness, ties in with a figure eight knot, and a fisherman's knot for backup. She whistles twice and faces the cliff.

The first move is always the hardest, like jumping into water that will be too cold. She puts her hands on the cliff. She is surprised at how pale they are. They drop to her sides.

The cliff is graphic granite, cream feldspar background flecked with the darker quartz that gives the rock its name, seeming to constitute hieroglyphs she can't quite read. Martas waits above her. Think, she tells herself, you know how to climb.

She forces herself to breathe. She remembers Nathan yelling at her in the beginning, "Not from your hands! Look at your feet, look at your feet!" Foothold, weight transfer, step, rest. It is three thousand feet. If each step is one foot, only three thousand steps. That is not so far. She jams her left toes into the crack, rests her left hand in a concavity a few feet above the foothold. Nathan said keep your hands low. She shifts her weight onto her left leg, steps up. Her right hand reaches above her, finds a cleft in the rock. Her right foot smears against the face. She rests. One.

She raises her right foot over her left, places its outside edge on a nub to the inside of the crack. She weights her right foot, presses her palms flat against the face of the cliff, steps up while pushing down on her hands. Her left foot finds purchase just above her right. She rests. Two.

It is not possible to climb three thousand feet into the air. She is not a bird. She is not a Kailan with prehensile toes extending from the soles of her climbing shoes. She is not even Nathan, laughing at the sky on their last climb, back arched, one arm flung wide and open. Don't look down, she tells herself, don't look up. Look at the rock in front of you. There is a crack running straight up to Martas. Climb.

At the belay stance, Martas says only, "We were going to meet the others

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for the midday rest, but I think we'll catch up with them this evening." Sarah reddens. She clips into the belay anchor for safety, then unties her climbing knot and runs the rope through her belay device again. Kailan gear is primitive; Martas says they love rock, not gear. The quickdraws are braided webbing, in dusky colors to match the cliff. Martas dashes up another 100 feet, whistles once, and she is climbing again.

Rock is its own world, on Earth or Kailas. There is nothing in this world but the taste of sweat and granite, gritty on her tongue, the breath rasping in her lungs, the bitter pale sky. Her chest burns. She wants to bury herself in the cliff, but holds her body out over her feet, the inverted pendulum Nathan taught her. The cliff is washed out buff and greens and grays; her hands are smeared to gray, as are her shoes. The scrub vanishes below her, but no matter how far she climbs, Nathan will always be higher.

The polite word for *gleuft* is *unfer,* unfortunate one.

Shree chirps to serself, something se hasn't done since se was a child first learning to climb. Se had forgotten the brightness of the cliff, quartz shining mostly white or clear, but here and there streaked with tiny veins of black, pale pink, or lavender. There are patches of iridescent mica, and tiny flecks of dark green amphibole. Se had forgotten how the cliff suggests its own rhythm, expands in time as well as space. Se invents games to enhance the rhythm, avoids the obvious holds, looks instead for the tiny crevices that make ser stretch and dance. Se isn't high enough yet to see the port or the lake shore, two hundred miles away; from here the desert seems as wild as the whole of Kailas did, looking down from the humans' orbiting station.

The human is far below ser, plodding up the mountain with fierce dedication. Ser—no, *her,* Shree corrects serself—face is squashed longer than it is wide, so it is hard to read her expressions. She doesn't seem like a creature that abandons her young, but maybe that is the other kind.

Shree wonders why the human is climbing so badly, whether it is her low center of gravity, or her recent illness, or because she can't think clearly without her mate. Although Martas has said it isn't true that each human sex has only half a brain, that they couple to find what they have lost.

Perhaps the human is mourning. Shree serself stopped climbing when they took away ser sib. It is *unfer,* ser parents had said. Se'd thought they'd meant the baby's pale hairless skin and damp scent, but ser fur had grown in, mottled gray and black and white like Shree's own, and se had come to smell like spring dirt, like family. When the baby finished nursing, they took ser away. It can never be a mother, only a father or a subtle parent, ser parents explained. It can never form a family. Shree imagined ser on an island with the other *gleuft* children, wondering what se had done wrong. Shree never saw the child again, though sometimes when se dances, se glimpses ser out of the corner of ser eye.

Shree hasn't seen ser sib today; instead se feels the cliff press against ser, like the lovers se has dreamed of but not yet had. Se smells ser own coppery mating scent and hopes no one will notice.

At the evening rest, Racha is as distant and polite as if se were at ser office, but Emmine teases, suggests Shree meet ser younger sib's first child and the second child of a friend. There is a pleading tone to Emmine's teasing; se is afraid, Shree knows, that in this next generation the families will all be broken. The *gleuft* will corrupt our children, se has said, until their wholeness is obliterated, until they are as broken as the *gleuft* themselves.

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They will forget to hold fast to all sides of a question; they will forget to balance give and take, strength and weakness, living and dying. And then how will they form a marriage, how will they form a family, when they won't even be able to balance themselves?

"I will meet your friends," says Shree, to comfort ser.

When the human arrives, the conversation stops, but she seems too tired to notice. She is awkward, has to be given her rations and shown how to hook her hammock into the anchor. She hugs the hammock netting as though she would prefer a ledge for the night, instead of the thousand feet of air below. Shree serself finds the hammock comforting; it is just like the wall cradles se rocked in when se was young.

When the human is settled, Martas joins Emmine in teasing Shree. Se jokes about ser time at the station, about *men* and *women* dancing, and asking ser home. Shree is embarrassed. Emmine reluctantly asks for details, but Martas just laughs. "I wouldn't *really* go into their houses," se says.

Shree thinks Martas is telling Emmine that se can be allies with ser, that se can agree to allow humans on Kailas, without approving of them, without having to change. Shree is not so sure. Se misses ser sib. Se listens to the night instead of Martas, the wind carrying the desert's rustling to ser ears. For a moment se feels as singular as the old priests, the ones who kept climbing after their mates fell.

Se smiles to serself, spreads ser toes on the wind. Se dreams of dancing on the edge of the world.

Sarah lies in her hammock, tethered to the rock; with her eyes half closed she can remove the distortions in the constellations and almost imagine she is on Earth, but it smells wrong, the air heavy with the coppery scent of Kailan arousal. She had smelled the faintest hint of it once before, on the station, and had turned the corner to find Martas and Nathan leaning together. If Martas were ten years younger, Nathan was teasing ser, se would shave the fur from ser right arm or ser left, the rebellious asymmetry of the young. Martas burbled Kailan laughter, then saw Sarah and quieted. Nathan had looked up, and held out his arm to her. "I'm just on my way home," she had said, but Martas was leaving.

In bed she had pulled him down to her fiercely, trying to forget Kailas. She had kissed him frantically all over his face, but when he was inside her, she had found herself wondering how the Kailans touched, what it would be like to be all the same, to be mother, father in turn, to be the subtle parent that gives to the embryo's early cellular environment but not to ser genes. Then she had caught the rhythm again, held him tightly between his shoulder blades and along the small of his back, pressed him into her. At the end, when she had cried and clung to him, he had stroked her hair and hushed her, and promised he'd never leave.

Sarah understands more than she cares to of Martas's teasing. She tries not to listen. She doesn't want to go into their house either.

Sarah wakes up, sure she is falling. She is too terrified to move. The dawn is dusty pink and gray; in the distance, something is crying, *cri, cri, cri.* She forces herself to keep her eyes level, to look only at the rock in front of her, at her hammock, at Martas combing the gray tufts above ser eyes and around ser almost hidden ears. Martas smiles at her. Sarah tries to smile in return, grimaces instead.

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She sits up, drops the leg loops from her harness, urinates through the hammock's netting. She tries to keep her genitals hidden. She forces herself to eat breakfast, a carbohydrate mix that swells to a soggy loaf when she adds water. Martas helps her into a belay swing. Her chest is burning and her hands are soaked before anyone has started climbing.

Shree brushes past her, swinging into the lead. "My sib is *gleuft,*" se whispers. Sarah stares after ser, momentarily forgetting her fear. They no longer destroy the children who are *gleuft,* Nathan had said, now they institutionalize them for life. I don't know much more, he'd added, Martas doesn't like to talk about it. Sarah reaches a hand toward Shree, but se is gone.

The first pitch is a thin flake, a flat pancake of rock laid on the mountain as if by afterthought. They have paired Sarah with Racha, who has climbed the pitch as if it were a face climb, body turned straight toward the rock. Sarah doesn't trust her balance so she does a layback instead: body folded as if she were touching her toes, hands pulling on the flake, feet pushing against the face. The move takes more strength than grace; it has to be done fast before her muscles burn. The cliff shrinks to the rock in front of her. Her hands are slipping with no chalk to dry her sweat; she grasps the flake harder until it bites into her palms and her grip catches.

Racha has been more cautious than Martas; halfway to the belay stance, se has wedged several chocks under the flake. Sarah pulls herself upright, hand over hand, to free her hands enough to retrieve the chocks. For a moment her shoes can't find purchase on the face, but she chins herself on the flake until her feet steady. Her forearms are burning, pumped. She holds onto the quickdraw for a few minutes before cleaning the chocks, shakes each hand in turn, trying to relieve the pressure. In her mind, Nathan is raising his eyes. Protection is just that, for falls, he'd said, not for balance or holds. So *you* climb it, she tells him.

She is gasping by the time she reaches Racha. She clips quickly into the belay anchor, then rests her cheek on the rock to breathe. The sun is beginning to heat her shoulders, but the granite is still cool. The first damn pitch, she thinks, only the first damn pitch. Racha says nothing, only holds out ser hand for the chocks Sarah has cleaned. Racha has the sharp untrimmed claws of Kailan conservatives. Sarah's hands start shaking again; in the concentration of the climb she had forgotten to be afraid. Don't look down, she thinks, don't look down.

Racha climbs; she follows. The second pitch is a traverse to a face climb. Be careful on a traverse, Nathan always said, your body wants to climb up. He would alternate his feet as if he were walking, cross his trailing foot behind his leading leg, then delicately step his front foot forward again. Sarah shuffles instead, sidestepping with her right foot, then sliding her left to meet it.

Her body is frustrated with the lateral movement; the top of the cliff seems no closer than yesterday. She reaches up without thinking, onto the barren face. Her foothold vanishes. She is clinging to a tiny lip in the rock and then suddenly she is falling, swinging through space, a plumb bob searching for alignment in the alien gravity.

She jars to a halt, then unexpectedly drops another foot. She looks up. Racha is belaying with one hand while the other reinserts a fallen anchor. She should be frightened, but she only feels calm, numb. Her chest has stopped hurting; she breathes quietly for the first time since she started the climb. She rests her feet lightly against the wall, then balances upright, taking her weight off of the rope. From this distance, Racha looks like an insect,

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stick-like limbs bristling with ragged fur. Until a few generations ago, Nathan had said, Kailans climbed their first walls unroped. She should be dead, she thinks, but she's not, so she climbs.

The face seems smooth from a distance; up close, she can smear her shoes against subtle protrusions and dips in the rock. She holds her palms flat against the face, fingers tightly curled to dig her fingertips into the tiny edges. She scrambles up the cliff; when she slips, she hangs on the rope until she can place her feet above her waist and stand up again, gaining a few feet on each fall. Nathan says she is cheating, but his voice is dim.

At the belay stance, Racha says formally, "I am sorry I dropped you." It is the first time se has spoken to her. As if se has taken too much responsibility, se adds, "You are heavier than I thought."

Racha's fur is rubbed off under the climbing rope. The skin underneath looks raw. Sarah has been too frightened to notice how fragile the Kailans are. "Are you hurt?" she asks.

"Martas said you would fall," Racha says, "but I did not believe ser." Se is silent for a moment, examining the cliff face. "I did not want to wear the harness," se says finally, raising ser head to Sarah.

She nods. Racha is a believer, she thinks, maybe even the rope is a concession. The falls have jammed her figure-eight knot too tightly for her to undo. She holds the knot out to Racha. Racha threads one claw into the center of the knot and twists ser wrist. The knot eases. Se backs the end of the rope through the figure eight and hands it to Sarah.

Racha climbs again. Sarah's muscles stiffen while she belays, but she can't keep her balance as the Kailans do, to stretch against the cliff. She is tired and awkward when it is her turn to climb.

The pitch follows a narrowing crack. She jams her fist above a constriction in the crack; as her weight rises, she twists her hand to keep the hold solid. When the crack narrows to finger width, she stacks her fingers on top of each other to tighten her grip. The backs of Kailan hands are protected by fur; her own knuckles are bruised and bloody. She smears her hand print on the rock, some color amidst the gray.

Her thighs are leaden, heavier than they'd ever been on earth; she wants to raise them with her hands but can't let go. The crack smells of dust and something acrid, like ants. There has never been a time when she wasn't on this mountain, there will never be a time when she can stop. She thinks perhaps this is a good thing; she has left herself behind in the valley and there is no one to meet her at the top. Her forearms are burning, give way; she is sliding again, this time twisting as she falls, her back momentarily to the cliff and all of Kailas stretched before her, first the desert, then a spider's web of roads, and finally, in the distance, the pastel towers of the port city. She dangles in the air. She can't think of a reason to get back on the rock until Racha whistles sharply three times: help, stop.

When she reaches Racha, ser eyes are shot with blood. "I'm sorry," says Sarah. I don't want to hurt you. I don't know why we ever came, she thinks, I don't know why I followed him.

"I am fine," says Racha, "But perhaps tomorrow you will climb again with Martas."

They are silent for the rest of the day, but when they reach the others, Racha pitches ser hammock by her. Emmine ignores her. Shree wiggles ser fingers, a friendly hello, claws pointed to ser own chest. She has no more water; Martas gives her the last of ser own.

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The coppery scent is more subdued today; when night falls, there is no flirting. Instead Racha speaks of magma, extrusion, erosion, dust. Granite, se says, is what is left of the mountain, when all other rock is taken away.

The night smells like rain, a discordant breeze swept from the distant lake shore. "You will change our world," says Racha. "The *gleuft* will come to live among us. Maybe not in my lifetime, but they will surely come." Ser voice is almost inaudible. "And when we are broken, who will cherish the children?" se says, "Who will keep the generations whole?"

Se is silent for a moment, a shadow with limbs branching against the stars. Se turns to Sarah. "It's not just us," se says, "but I don't know how we have broken you." Sarah doesn't answer. Nathan is gone, she thinks. I want to go home, but I don't have one anymore.

The dawn is gray; the granite ashen. There is no more water. She chokes down the carbo mix dry.

"I'm sorry," says Martas, "I didn't realize you needed so much water."

Why should you have, thinks Sarah. She finds she is watching herself from a distance; she is a voice assigning tasks to an over-tired child. Now you must roll up your hammock. Now you must tighten your shoes.

By the time she is ready to go, Emmine has climbed to the first belay stance. Sarah imagines she can hear ser teeth chattering a warning. She can't stop shivering, though she knows it isn't cold. Racha is climbing in the second position today, neither leading nor belaying. Se has dark bruises under ser eyes. Shree whistles softly as se belays, feet scraping absent-mindedly against the rock. Se flutters ser fingers against Sarah's arm, matching its trembling.

"Not far," se says, in broken English, "the top."

Sarah nods as if she believes ser.

Martas checks Sarah's waist strap and belay device, then double checks the belay anchors. "Please check your knots before you climb," se says. Se taps the rope near Sarah's waist, as if unsure that she will remember. Se doesn't seem to want to climb. "I'm sorry we have no more water," se says again.

The rope slides through Sarah's hands. She stares at the granite in front of her, buff and cream and ash. She imagines she can trace its edge, but when she looks again, it has grown more intricate, and when she looks again, more intricate still. Granite, Racha said, is what is left when everything else is taken away.

When she climbs, her feet are too numb to feel the face; she sets them down with the fierce attention of a child learning to print her name. Martas is keeping tension in the rope. Sarah wants to tell ser to stop, not to hurt serself like Racha, but she is too grateful, rests as much of her weight on the rope as it will bear.

The belay stance is luxurious, a ledge almost two feet wide. All four of the Kailans are waiting. She doesn't have the energy to be surprised. Behind the ledge, the cliff cants gently backward. Shree was right, she can see the top, scrubby brush and succulents dangling over the edge. It is not much more than a hundred feet; two pitches, maybe one. She can't stop shaking, she doesn't know why she can't stop shaking, but it doesn't matter; nothing matters but that this be over. She sinks to the ground without tying into the belay anchor, closes her eyes until her breathing stills. When she opens them Emmine is staring at her, both hands curled.

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"It's *her* first time," Emmine says, spitting out the English word, "From here *she* goes unroped."

Of course, Sarah thinks. She finds herself nodding at her enemy. Let us do the ritual, though it doesn't matter. Racha is right; our worlds were broken the day they met, whether I fall or no. She shrugs the cleaned gear over her shoulder and pushes the pile to Martas, then pulls herself upright to lean against the face. She wants to rest her hands silent on the rock like Racha, but they are trembling birds that won't lie still. Martas is shouting something she can't hear; Emmine stares away from her, out over the ledge at the drop below. Shree keeps opening ser mouth as if se would speak.

Some part of her remembers: Don't look down. The world is shuddering in and out of focus; she fights to hold the picture steady, follows a tiny circle of gray. As she nears the top, the cliff angles toward the vertical again, a hand inexorably pushing her back. She looks down, and the valley sways, three thousand feet below. She grabs for handholds, too high, ignoring her feet like a beginner. The mountain vibrates beneath her. She can't stop shaking, stretched too far to drop her heels. Her hands are too slick to hold the rock. She is going to slide off the edge of the world. She will bounce against the cliff face, gaining speed as she falls, each bounce a closer parody of flight until she crashes against the ground. She doesn't care. Let this be over, she thinks. Let me lie quiet at the base of the cliff, broken as I have always been.

Shree watches the human; she has stopped climbing near the top. Her hindquarters are bulbous and trembling. She is almost there, Shree thinks, why doesn't she climb? Perhaps she is thirsty. Perhaps she is frightened. Emmine stares at the foot of the cliff, at nothing. Martas and Racha stand rooted to the rock. Perhaps she is lonely, Shree thinks. After ser sib was born, ser parents never had another child. How could they send ser away, se thinks. Se was so small.

Shree finds se is climbing, foot over hand, the rock streaming past as if se were running along the ground. "My sib is *gleuft!*" se shouts, "My sib is *gleuft!*"

Martas and Racha are immobile. Emmine is swaying in negation. No, the world cannot be broken; no, not here, too. Shree climbs. They took you away from me, se says, to the shadow that has always been climbing beside ser. They took you away from me, and they never told me your name.

"I climb," Shree shouts, switching to English, "Sarah! I climb! I climb!"

Sarah hears the commotion beneath her; Shree is shouting at her from half way up the crack. She stacks her fingers, one on top of the other, and the grip holds. Shree blows past her, a leaf on the wind. "I climb!" se says. In ser wake, Sarah hauls herself over the edge on her belly, Nathan lecturing in her head: never crawl over the last lip, choose your footholds high enough to step cleanly over the top. She wishes she had strength enough to laugh, but all she can do is lie on the welcoming rock, and wonder how the surrounding brush has suddenly grown so green. I thought this world had only gray, she thinks.

Shree has torn off ser shoes, spread ser toes out like wings, is dancing as if se will fly. I am alive, thinks Sarah. She wants to join Shree's dance, but can only raise one arm to ser, mimicking the curve of ser gestures. Nathan, she thinks, you would have climbed this cliff perfectly, but you would never have climbed it the way the Kailans do. You would never have learned to believe.

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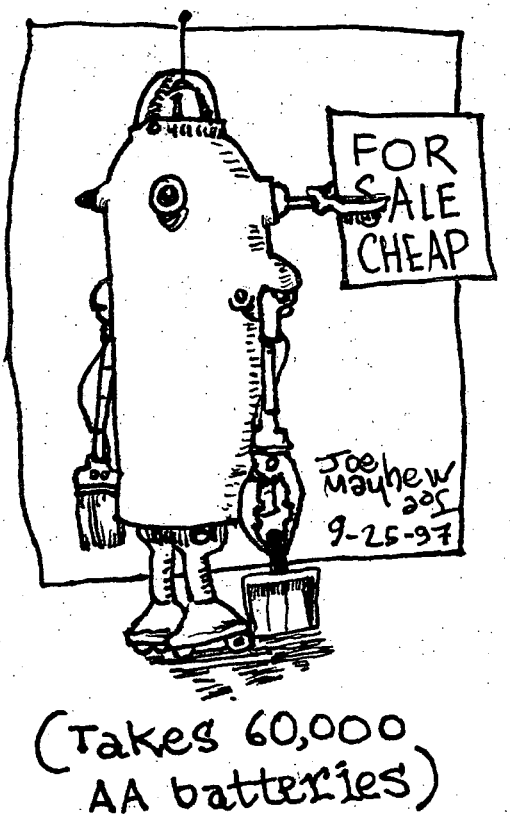
The others have reached the top. Martas is beaming, head thrown back and mouth gaping wide. Emmine doesn't look at her or Shree, sits down with ser gear, facing the drop below. Racha nods at her, but says nothing, eyes half closed with grief. Sarah nods in return. Racha is a believer, she thinks; if I have climbed, there is something in me se must accept as whole, though it break ser world. Emmine is more practical; for ser the battle is just beginning.

And me? she thinks. I don't know. I don't know if it is right for anyone human to stay; I don't know if now it would be worse for me to go. I know I am as whole and as broken as Shree or Racha, as our worlds are in their meeting, as is everything born to die. For now, I am here.

Shree comes to sit beside her. Se is shorter than Sarah remembered; if they were standing, ser head would reach only just past her shoulder. Ser mottled fur is soft as angora. "Look," se says, pointing, "you can see the port from here." Sarah raises herself onto her elbows, catches a glimpse of the city: pastel towers in ecru, sand, and pale coral, and then the sudden cobalt of the lake beyond. "Tomorrow," says Shree, "I will show you where I learned to dance." ❍



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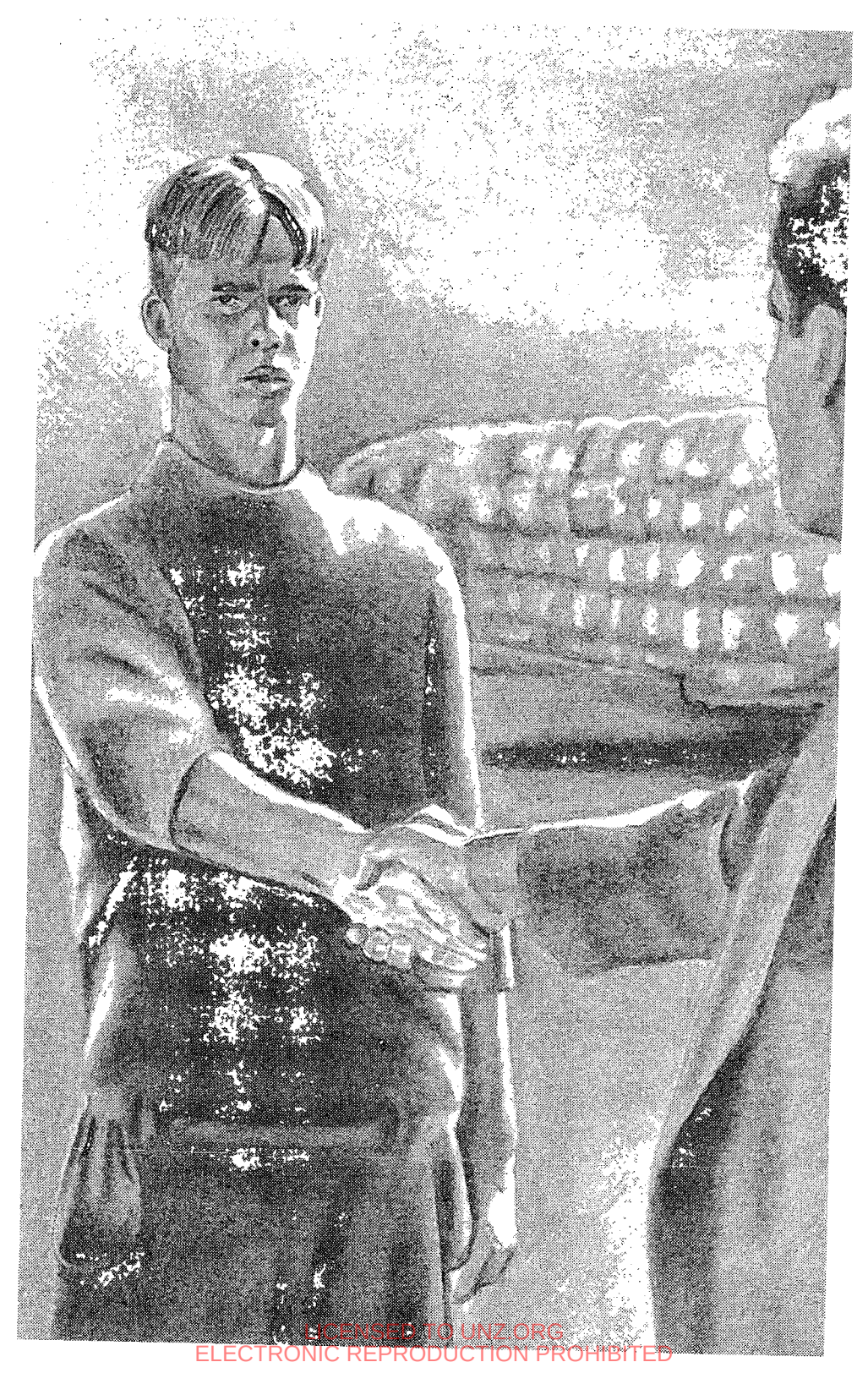

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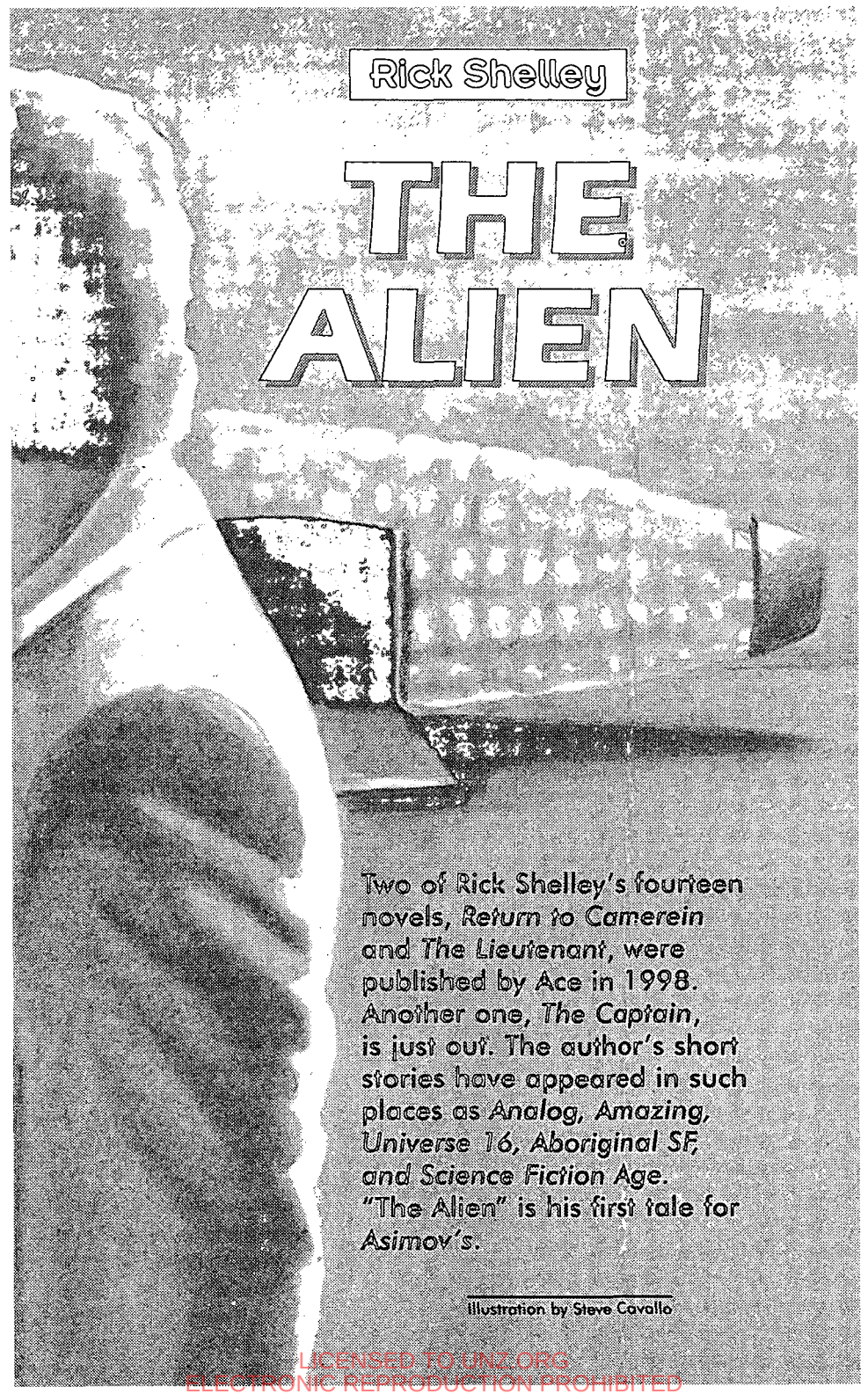
Rick Shelley

THE ALIEN



Two of Rick Shelley's fourteen novels, *Return to Camerein* and *The Lieutenant*, were published by Ace in 1998. Another one, *The Captain*, is just out. The author's short stories have appeared in such places as *Analog*, *Amazing*, *Universe 16*, *Aboriginal SF*, and *Science Fiction Age*. "The Alien" is his first tale for *Asimov's*.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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The bottom line is, we didn't find them; they found us—one more proof that mankind has had its collective head up its collective rectum for at least the past sixty years.

I read the last sentences of my latest screed with satisfaction. *The past sixty years:* since the United States stepped back from Apollo and the Moon. The advent of the alien spaceship was a Godsend, giving me a chance to tie together a lot of my complaints and put a pretty bow on the top. It even looked as if I were finally getting through to a few people.

That was a mixed blessing. I got a lot of satisfaction from reducing my critics to impotent rage. If too many agreed with me, I would have to find new arenas to stir up the stuff that was about to hit the fan when the alien ship finally arrived.

The aliens—the goshilves—were taking their own sweet time coming in. They had started broadcasting out near the orbit of Jupiter, and they were making a decaying-orbit approach that would take eighteen months from the first "Here we are" call until the ship reached Earth. The aliens were giving us plenty of time to get used to the idea of them. That, and the fact that their first call had been in English, led to the inescapable conclusion that they had been studying us at length.

That gave me an idea for my next column. I hit the three-key sequence that would send the current essay out to six dozen TheNet sites and typed in a few notes.

They've been studying us. Their choice of when to announce themselves and come in suggests that they have finally decided that THEY ARE READY FOR US.

I chuckled. I was going to enjoy writing that piece. Since I've never been one to postpone enjoyment unnecessarily, I started drafting the column. The ideas kept coming. It wasn't as if I had anything else important to do. I could work until I got too hungry or too sleepy to continue without assuaging the dominant need.

It flowed. After ninety minutes I was at three thousand words and could see that much more to go. Anything over eight hundred words won't get much attention on TheNet unless it's nonstop, hard-core porn. I would either have to cut the piece severely or break it into two or three columns.

Without warning, the word processor screen was replaced with a blank red. That shouldn't have been possible. Then the monitor started flashing, alternating between red and purple. A series of concentric boxes in garish colors followed that. Finally, the center box enlarged and a three-word message appeared in bold inch-high letters: **ANSWER YOUR DOOR**.

The first knock on the door sounded at the same time. I nearly jumped out of my seat. A funny sensation slithered up and down my spine. In the first place, it should have been impossible for anyone to commandeer my computer remotely. In the second place, it also should have been impossible for anyone to tie together my computer and physical addresses. I worked hard to keep those separate, just in case some crazy decided to do whatever he had to in order to shut me up permanently.

I looked toward the door. The knocking continued. I looked at the monitor again. The message remained. Then I looked at the window . . . with some longing . . . and more regret. My apartment was on the seventeenth floor.

Keep quiet, I told myself. *Maybe they'll give up and go away.* The fact that I had no idea who "they" might be bothered me. That and the fact that this was happening at all.

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The border of the message on the computer started flashing. Changing colors marched around the rectangle like colored lights in an old sign. The words started to brighten and darken. The knocking at the door continued. After a couple of minutes, the computer speakers got into the act.

"Answer your door," a synthetic voice announced. That was repeated. Then: "We know you're in there, Tony Hampton. Open the door or we'll break it down."

I was scared, frightened more than half out of my wits.

The last warning was repeated. I closed my eyes for an instant and took in a deep breath. There were no weapons in the apartment, not that I had any experience in the use of weapons.

"Okay, I'm coming," I said. "Keep your pants on."

There were no automatics on my door. I couldn't even remember the last time another human being had actually set foot inside the place—and that was the way I liked it.

"I'm coming," I said, louder, as I started toward the door. My hands were shaking.

I glanced through the peephole before I unlocked the door. There were at least three people standing in the hall, two men and a woman, all dressed well.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"We represent the United States government," one of the men said. He held an ID card up in front of the peephole, but I wasn't able to read it.

"What do you want?" Okay, it figured to be government. Despite near panic, my brain hadn't quit functioning altogether. If anyone could do what they had done, it needed powerful resources. I've got the best privacy protection available.

"We need to talk to you, and not through a door," the same man said.

"Why?"

"The sooner you let us in, the sooner you'll know," the woman said.

"You have a warrant?"

"How would you like to have all utilities and deliveries shut down?" the woman asked.

It was obvious that I wasn't going to get anywhere stalling, and I had no way to know how much farther I could push things without getting my door bashed in—and maybe my head. I opened the door on the chain.

"Let me see that ID again," I said. "Where I can read it."

The man with the card stuck it in the opening. I read it.

"*State* Department?" I asked. "What the hell does the State Department want with me?" I was already opening the door though, so none of my visitors answered immediately.

"Come on in," I invited, since I had no choice. "This place wasn't designed for entertaining."

"We're not here for fun and games," the woman said.

They were quite formal. There had to be introductions. The woman was Carlotta Sanchez. The man with the ID card was Howard Bekira. The last of the trio was R.J. Kenneal, initials only. Carlotta sat on the easy chair. I sat on the office chair at my computers. The others stood.

"Now, will someone tell me what the hell this is all about?" I asked. Nothing dramatic had happened. They hadn't put me in chains or brought out rubber hoses. State Department? My nervousness was giving way to a more familiar annoyance.

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Initials-only said, "The aliens may be ready for us, but we may also be ready for them."

I recognized my own words being tossed back at me, but I had not sent those words out on the net. I had them in local storage, in a directory that was absolutely proof against hacking. Or so I thought.

"You know, you've given me plenty of grounds for an invasion of privacy suit," I said. Not to mention material for at least a half dozen tirades on TheNet.

"No we haven't," Bekira said. "You couldn't prove a thing. In any case, you might not have the opportunity."

"That supposed to be some sort of threat?" I wanted to get things out in the open, whatever was going on.

"Not at all," Sanchez said. "It's just that you are likely to be far too busy to tilt at that windmill."

"I'm getting tired of this farce," I said. "Whatever you're going to do, do it. Let's close down this pussyfooting around."

The three of them exchanged looks. Howard Bekira took a step toward me and did the talking. "In just twenty-three days, that alien ship will be in orbit above Earth."

"Tell me something I don't know," I said.

"A little patience, please," Carlotta Sanchez said. The "please" was enough of a surprise to shut me up.

"There has been a lot of communication between us and the aliens," Bekira continued. "Communications, but nothing resembling negotiations. We are merely providing each other with information about ourselves, preparatory to face-to-face talks."

He paused again, but this time I kept my mouth shut, just shooting Sanchez a glance. She was watching me. So was Kenneal.

"These aliens are . . . different," Bekira said. "Strange. Alien. We don't understand much about them, even after seventeen months of rather intense talk. And, so far as we can determine, they may not have any better understanding of us."

"Remember," I said. "'Alien' is the defining word here."

"Yes, of course," Bekira said, making a gesture of dismissal. "But the goshilves are . . . far stranger than we could have imagined. We don't understand the way they think. And they don't seem to understand the way *we* think."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. Bekira was so patently serious, solemn, and troubled.

"Hell, half of the time I don't understand the way most people think," I said.

Quietly, over on the side, Sanchez said, "Exactly," and I got a queasy feeling in my stomach as I turned to face her.

"Would you care to elaborate on that?" I asked.

She met my stare without flinching. "To many people, you are as alien as the goshilves."

If this was a comic strip, the next panel would show a light bulb over my head. "You want *me* to get in the middle here?"

"It should not come to that," Kenneal said. "There are, after all, thousands of professional diplomats, in this country and in the other major countries of Earth. The government *does* want to avail itself of your . . . unique perspectives before and during the initial negotiations. The State Department has authorized us to offer you a contract as a special consultant."

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I stared at him. At first, I wasn't even aware that I was shaking my head—in disbelief, not refusal.

"The government considers this to be of critical importance," Kenneal said, obviously misreading the gesture. "If it did not, we would never have been permitted to take such, ah, liberties in the manner of contacting you."

"You mean breaking into my computer and making threats."

"Ah, yes," Kenneal admitted.

"This is more than just a matter of vital national interest," Sanchez said, leaning forward. "This is vital for the entire world, for the entire human race."

She was so damned *earnest* that it was all I could do to keep a straight face. "I suppose you want an answer immediately," I said after a moment of silence.

"There are only twenty-three days until the goshilves go into orbit around Earth," Bekira said. "That won't give you much time to assimilate all of the material we have and form your opinions."

Sure, I *could* have told them to take a long walk off a short pier or used a dozen other clichés. But the truth was, I really didn't have much choice. Not because of who they were or what they said, but because of who I am. I do have an ego. I could get a lot of mileage out of being called in to solve a problem that the government couldn't even figure out how to attack.

I sighed, then said, "Okay, you can start downloading everything to my terminal. I'll wade through it and see what I can come up within the next three weeks."

Sanchez and Kenneal shook their heads. Bekira saved his energy for words. "We can't do that. You'll have to come to Washington. We have facilities set up for our task force."

"You mean I'm not the only one you're suckering in on this?"

"There must be twenty thousand people, worldwide, working exclusively on the problems inherent in this contact," Sanchez said.

"Bureaucrats of the world, unite," I whispered.

I had never been to Washington, never been on an airplane before. I rarely left my apartment building. It had all of the social facilities I wanted. Wells Fargo armored cars delivered groceries twice a day and the Postal Service and UPS each made daily rounds to bring in anything else I ordered.

The State Department had taken over an entire hotel, brought in Marines and its own police, and put up barricades around the building. There were State Department people everywhere—at the front desk, in the kitchen and bar, riding the elevators. One of the function rooms on the ground floor had been turned into a command post. The rest of the public rooms were set up for face-to-face meetings among the people being brought in to figure out how to deal with the goshilves.

I was assigned a two-room suite on the fifth floor. One room was filled with a better computer layout than I had at home. The one limit was that while I could get any information I wanted, from anywhere in the world, I couldn't send anything out. All of the computers were linked to servers in the command post. Anything going out or coming in had to be routed through there.

"One of the three of us will be in the room just across the hall from you, twenty-four hours a day," Carlotta said before she and the men left. "Any ur-

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gent messages will appear on your computers. If you aren't logged on, there will be a phone call or a knock on the door to make sure you don't miss anything. Any questions?"

Yes, I had questions, hundreds of them, but none that I thought I could get a decent answer to from my minders. I shook my head, then—as the three musketeers were leaving—I thought of one I did want to ask.

"Isn't it about time for supper?"

"Meals are available around the clock," Sanchez told me. "You can call for room service or go down to the restaurant or lounge. Going downstairs is faster, if you're in a hurry. There are also vending machines on each floor. Just make your selections. No coins or cards required."

"I just charge everything to Uncle Sam?"

"It's all being taken care of," Sanchez said.

After going down to the hotel restaurant to eat, I logged on to the private net. I stared at the screen for most of the next eight hours, until my eyes ached from the strain. Some of what I read had been available on TheNet, but not nearly all of it. I read. Occasionally, I leaned back and thought about what I was reading, the goshilves' account of themselves. I did not have any flashes of illumination, any brilliant ideas.

"This isn't telling me much," I mumbled when I finally pushed away. "I'm only getting half of the story." I went into the bathroom to dampen a wash cloth to hold over my eyes, then went back to the computer. I moved to the main menu. What I was looking for wasn't even listed.

I queried the server: "How do I obtain the files on what we have told the goshilves about ourselves?"

The answer took two minutes. "That information is not available on the local databases. Your request is being forwarded to the State Department liaison." There was no indication how long it might take for any response.

"There is no point in going any farther without that information," I typed. Then I went to bed.

"Why do you need the information that we have sent to the goshilves?" Carlotta Sanchez asked me some eight hours later.

"What they're telling us has to be matched against what we're telling them. Reference points. Are they responding to us, or are we responding to them? Without both sides, this whole exercise is a waste of time."

"No one else has seen any need for that."

"Maybe that's why you needed me," I told her. Two hours later, the information I had requested was available.

The details of the next three weeks are a blur. I averaged eighteen to twenty hours at the computer each day. Our hosts quickly gave up on daily conferences downstairs. It was impossible to get all of us awake and together at any given time. And few of us were social enough to *want* any part of those meetings. We did talk over the local net. A running on-line conference, monitored by whoever was in charge, had to satisfy State. It was the best they were going to get.

At first, I tried to follow the conversations between Earth and the goshilves chronologically, going from one side to the other. That was an impossible quest, though, since the "conversation" had been going on for seventeen months, often on more than one frequency at a time. I switched to following

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the topic outlines that had been compiled, jumping into the detailed data whenever something caught my eye.

Before the end of a week, my mind was numb. Existence had been pared down to a minimal universe: the conversations, meals, sleep. And sleep started to bring computer dreams—screens of data presented themselves, one after the other, sometimes accurately, sometimes in exaggeration, parody, or whatever.

Once, when it really starting to get to me, I switched over to the chat group and typed, "I hope that the government is prepared to pay for the psychotherapy it's going to take to get us back to normal after this."

Twenty minutes later Sanchez and Kenneal were at my door. Carlotta led me away from the computer. Kenneal shut it down.

"Talk to me," Carlotta said.

"About what?" My mind was in a complete fog.

"What makes you think you're going to need psychotherapy?" Carlotta asked, which jogged my memory.

I remember blinking, and shaking my head. "Overload."

"Overload? You're working too many hours?" Carlotta asked.

"Something. I can't even get away from it when I'm sleeping. It's drowning me. Sometimes it's all I can do not to scream." I thought about that. "Maybe a scream would help."

I tried it. Carlotta almost jumped out of her seat.

"Did it help?" she asked after she regained her composure.

I considered that. "It didn't hurt."

"You need to take a little more time away from the work," R.J. Kenneal said. "I know that time is critical, but we need clear heads to get anything."

I kept quiet. I can't even recall what, if anything, I was thinking. I stared at Kenneal, waiting.

"You're not the first to experience, ah, difficulties," Carlotta said. "The answer seems to be simple, longer breaks during your work sessions—they don't have to be a *lot* longer—a drink to relax you occasionally, and something to make sure that your sleep isn't disturbed by dreams."

"We're all freaking out?"

"Not all," Kenneal said. "And 'freaking out' is not a particularly helpful description. Stress. Overwork. Manageable conditions."

There was a knock at the door, and the announcement, "Room service." Kenneal answered the door and brought back a tray with a bottle of scotch, an ice bucket, and several glasses.

"Just what the doctor ordered," I said when I saw what he had. Neither of my minders laughed at the joke.

"We'll even join you," Carlotta said, straight-faced. Kenneal put ice and scotch in three glasses, took them into the bathroom for water, and brought them back.

I lifted mine and looked through it for a moment. "To padded cells and straitjackets." I drank down half of the scotch. I had taken a few drinks since coming to Washington, but that one tasted especially good.

"The doctor will be along shortly," Carlotta said. "He'll give you a quick check-up and give you some sleeping pills to avoid the dreams."

"You've got the shrink ready for us?" I asked.

"A medical doctor," Carlotta said.

"Whatever." I took another drink.

* * *

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The pills did the job. The scotch didn't hurt, and did not pose a danger in combination with the pills. The doctor was clear about that. He accepted my offer of a snort after he had taken my vital signs and asked a few questions.

It wasn't until the end of the second week, with the goshilves eight days from Earth orbit, that the State Department started pressing for results, for answers to their endless questions. Some of those made little sense. Most had no answers yet; at least, *I* had no answers for them. Some were simply idiotic, like, "On a scale of 1 to 10, how firm should we be in negotiations with the goshilves?" There were a lot like that. Give a number in a range. Bullcrap. Those and questions that started, "How will the goshilves respond to . . ." whatever.

"Why haven't the goshilves sent us pictures of themselves?" I asked on the chat line. "They obviously have been able to view our television signals. Why not reciprocate? And why such vague descriptions of themselves?" We had *asked* for pictures, several times, without getting a clear answer. The goshilves had said that they were bilaterally symmetrical bipeds, two eyes, stereo hearing. Their normal atmosphere was very close to Earth's; we could breathe each other's air without difficulties. They expected to be able to eat our food without danger.

My questions started a thread of discussion on the local net, but didn't generate any clearer answers. The State Department monitors only said that they hadn't thought it appropriate to press the goshilves on the question.

"More pussyfooting," I responded. "If people had been asking the right questions from the beginning, and insisting on answers, we wouldn't be in this mess today."

Twenty minutes later, the chat group monitor pulled the plug on the discussion that followed.

There is no satisfactory way to distill three weeks of concentrated study into capsule form. There was a lot of "match the technology or science" in which we compared empirical knowledge and theory. I only dipped into that haphazardly. There were language lessons. I almost completely ignored those—even though I recognized that language might provide important clues to the differences between us and them. I asked and was assured that there were specialists concentrating on language.

That still left history, sociology, literature, philosophy, and the like. The goshilves didn't make the same distinctions that humans would. They seemed to make little distinction between history and mythology, for example, or between fiction and nonfiction. Similarly, *now* and *then* appeared to have little place in the goshilves' view of the universe. I couldn't be sure of that from translations, so I queried the language specialists and received a series of muddled replies that indicated that they were having difficulty understanding goshilve tenses. There *were* different tenses, the usage was just different and subtle. In many cases, the only way to determine if past or present was meant was by context. Future tenses were easier to spot. They were always formulated as questions. Nothing about the future was definite, not even in the sciences.

I kept a notepad file with my observations, linked (when possible) to the data that had spurred them. Ideas popped into my mind whenever, not on schedule, and not always directly following whatever inspired them. Two or three times a day I went through those notes, sometimes erasing or modifying them, sometimes adding new ones.

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The rendezvous kept getting closer.

By the time the countdown reached seventy-two hours, there was an air of panic on the chat line. It was more apparent when my minders came around. All three of the people who had originally come to my apartment came into my hotel room.

"What now?" I asked.

"Time is running out," Bekira said. I had seen relatively little of him since coming to Washington. Sanchez and Kenneal had been far more in evidence.

"Do tell," I said.

"We need to start collecting results so that we can get all of the observations collated and decide how to approach this situation," Kenneal said.

My laugh must have sounded pretty sorry. I was at the tag end of a day's work, and tired. As long as I had stayed at the computer, working, I had been okay, but the break was letting exhaustion overtake me.

"It's no laughing matter," Kenneal assured me solemnly. "The fate of the entire human race could well be at stake."

"Give them *Alice in Wonderland,*" I said.

"What?" The three of them managed that in almost perfect unison. The assorted looks of astonishment were almost enough to give me an energy boost.

I sank back into my chair. "Look, it will give them something to think about, maybe buy us a little slack."

"What is your reasoning?" Bekira asked.

"They make little distinction between fact and fiction." Lecturing was going to make me tired in a hurry. "*Alice* should throw them for a real loop. *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. Throw twentieth century theater of the absurd at them. Kafka. 'Metamorphosis' ought to drive them nuts."

"That hardly seems . . . rational," Carlotta Sanchez said, her face screwed up in a frown.

"They've been observing us. We're not going to make points trying to prove how rational we are. So go the other way, show the extremes of human imagination."

"Most unorthodox," Kenneal observed.

"If you weren't banking on the unorthodox, you wouldn't have drafted me into this operation. You'd have stuck with your career diplomats and have everything written in stone. You knew that wouldn't work before you came after me."

If I had been thinking more clearly, I might have said it differently, or not at all. But I was tired, hungry, and groggy. It was easy to make a mistake. As soon as the three musketeers left, I went to bed and slept for seven hours. When I got up and checked the computer for our newest transmissions, I found all of the texts I had suggested and a few more, including a play called *Rhinoceros,* and Abbot and Costello's "Who's on First."

Then I watched for goshilve responses.

"Maybe they'll decide to back off and give us another couple of years to figure out how to deal with them," I said, chuckling at the idea of scaring them off with off-beat material.

The man who scared off the galaxy? That was good for another laugh. I found a certain attraction in the possibility. Iconoclast is almost my middle name.

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I had been watching the communications log for nearly two hours when the goshilves stopped transmitting. After the silence had continued for a couple of minutes—there had been brief hiatuses before—I nearly held my breath. The prospect that I really might scare the aliens off suddenly seemed to be less of a long-shot than I had imagined. I started to wonder what the results might be. For me, personally.

After thirty minutes of silence from the spaceship, I opened a window into the chat group and typed: ARE THEY STILL THERE?

It took two minutes before the monitor, the sysop, replied. YES, I THINK. That wasn't the most encouraging answer, but it wasn't the worst possible either.

Another forty-five minutes passed before there was a transmission from the aliens. It was a little longer, but what it boiled down to was, "Very interesting." Then they went silent again.

I nodded toward the screen. "You're welcome," I whispered.

Five minutes later, Carlotta and her companions returned.

"It appears your suggestion had some merit," Kenneal said. "We're not sure yet if the result will be positive or negative."

"We're making them *think,*" I said.

"But think what?" Bekira asked.

I shook my head. "Right now, it hardly matters. We want to get them off-balance, make them trash their pre-conceived ideas of us. That will put us on a more even footing, no matter what advanced technologies they might have."

"Do you have any other suggestions for material we might send?" Carlotta asked, very quietly.

"More of the same sort of stuff, the more absurd the better." I tried to hold back a Cheshire Cat grin. "Maybe the federal tax code." After a good, long sleep, I was feeling much better, much more like myself.

"You can't be serious," Kenneal said.

"Why not? That's as absurd as anything. As far as more stuff, you ought to be able to tap into specialists who can give you more ideas than I can. The absurd, the farcical. And maybe you'd better send your professional diplomats home and hire a stand-up comic to deal with the goshilves, someone who can improvise and keep the aliens guessing."

That was my second mistake.

During the last twenty-four hours of the goshilves' approach, we had decent video of their ship. Eighteen months had given the nations of Earth time to get satellites up with the best cameras (and other instruments). The ship was more than a mile long and as much as six-tenths of a mile in diameter. Out in front was a cone, some sort of shield. Five beams connected the cone to the rest of the ship. The main section had the appearance of a cob of corn, hundreds of bumps. At the rear, separated by three short, thick tubes, was the ship's main drive—the power plant. There were no protrusions that could be identified as antennas or solar collectors. Or anything else.

After the long silence, the goshilves remained somewhat taciturn. They had started transmitting again, but with frequent short interruptions. The nature of the conversations changed. Both sides were more interested in making preparations for the first face-to-face meetings.

That raised discussions on the hotel computer net about what the goshilves might look like. Again. And why they had been so adamant about not show-

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ing us, or telling us in detail, what they looked like. The speculations, many accompanied by drawings or frames from old sci-fi movies, grew wilder and wilder. The closest to a consensus that anyone could raise was that they had to be horrible monsters—or that they would look like it to us.

The truth was, when we learned it, more mundane . . . and infinitely more disturbing.

My third mistake was that I didn't simply say "No" when the unholy trio came in to tell me of the "great honor" that was being bestowed upon me. The temptation was there, and I've certainly had enough practice at being contrary. But after three weeks of intensive study of the goshilves I had more or less brainwashed myself.

"It is the considered opinion of the selection committee that you should be our primary spokesperson in the initial face-to-face talks with the goshilves." Carlotta broke the news.

I thought just how big a pain in the ass that would be, and the way I would almost certainly be blamed for anything that went wrong—and for every way that the meetings could go right, there might be a thousand ways for them to go wrong.

"You're kidding," I said.

"It was agreed, early on," Carlotta said, "that the primary spokesperson had to be someone whose first language was English, since most of our conversations have been in English. Since the largest concentration of native English speakers is in the United States, it was tacitly assumed that—unless a more obvious choice appeared from elsewhere—that the individual would be American. Your successful suggestion for varying our data stream the other day was the determining factor."

"We don't know how successful that was," I reminded her. "All we know is that it gave them reason to hesitate. We don't know what conclusions it may have led them to."

"Something nothing else we had transmitted to them did," Kenneal said. "Until we have better scales for measurement, that counts as a signal success."

"I don't much like the idea of going up to the alien spaceship," I said. That was only partly true. I was intensely curious, but I was also frightened by the possibility.

"The first meetings will be held on Earth," Bekira said.

"Where?" I asked, more to stall than because I had any deep curiosity about the location.

"In Missouri, not far from St. Louis," Kenneal said. "A site is being, has been, prepared."

"You want a professional gadfly to be the primary negotiator between mankind and the goshilves?" Gadfly is about the mildest of the tags that have been hung on me. Rabblerouser, armchair revolutionary, pain in the (add the body part of your choice), and so forth. I made my living trying to make people think, something always guaranteed to make many of them angry.

"You are the consensus choice," Carlotta confirmed.

"You will not, however, be alone," Howard said. "You will do much of the talking, but there will be experts and professional diplomats to assist. What the selection committee is counting on is your gift for the unexpected."

"Just who is on this selection committee?" I asked.

"People who know people," Bekira said.

"And who chose them?"

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"The foreign ministers and heads of state of the participating governments," Kenneal said. "That amounts to just about every nation on the face of the Earth."

"In other words, politicians chose people bland enough not to offend too many big shots. The kind of people who decided what information to give the goshilves over all of those months."

"It's your chance to be a hero and do something positive for the human race," Bekira said.

"All you need is the flag, drum, and fife to pose for that *Spirit of '76* painting," I said. "Have the Marine Corps Band parade up and down the hallway playing the national anthem."

"Who would you *rather* we chose to represent the human race?" Carlotta asked when I ran out of steam.

Ouch. That got me where it hurt, in my ego.

Two hours later I was in the air again. I still had my three minders, but there were two dozen people aboard to start briefing me for the first sessions with the goshilves. Half of those people were American. The rest represented nine other nations. More would be waiting for me in Missouri.

The "experts" didn't have much time on the plane to say anything useful, but I wasn't expecting much. *Pick the oddball because he is different, then bring in the establishment to try and turn him into a conformist.* That's like trying to convert a fox into a chicken when you desperately need the fox. But it was expectable. That's the kind of herd-mentality idiocy I've been fighting since I sent my first essay out on TheNet when I was only sixteen years old—ages ago.

I fought the urge to tell them to shut up. They did have information I needed. I wasn't interested in their opinions, but I did need the factual stuff, the physical arrangements. But none of them could stick to that. They all had suggestions—always more chaff than grain. And they were all as earnest and solemn as fire-and-brimstone preachers. By the time we landed I had a world-class headache, and pains in various other locations.

I don't know how long construction of the meeting site had been underway, but there were a dozen substantial buildings, roads, paved runway, fences, towers, and so forth. It all had a new look to it, but none of the buildings looked as if they might blow away the first time a stiff breeze came whipping across the state from Kansas.

The largest building was three stories tall. It had a faux-brick façade over frame construction, but it *looked* solid, and the floors didn't creak. Inside, it looked almost as deluxe as the Washington hotel. There were the usual amenities—restaurant, bar, and meeting rooms—on the ground floor. The living quarters on the two upper floors were perhaps smaller than most hotel rooms, but they were sufficient.

That building was just for humans, and not all of us. The goshilves would be housed in a smaller structure across a lane that had "Main Street" signs posted along it. The meetings would be held in a third building, next to the residence for the aliens. The rest of the buildings were devoted to support personnel, communications, supplies, and so forth.

"Who's footing the bill for all this?" I asked as my minders escorted me up the stairs to the top floor of the hotel. There was one thing missing—an elevator. But that was the only obvious sign of hurried construction.

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"More than thirty countries have subscribed to the cost," Bekira said. "More than that may contribute before this is over."

I snorted. "Only if they see some profit in it for them. Uncle Sam picking up the bulk of the tab?" No answer was answer enough. We would be paying most of the bills.

I had one surprise before the goshilves arrived. There were no heads of state or heads of government on hand to meet the aliens. Caution had overcome vanity. With politicians, that's news on the level of "man bites dog." The "official" reasoning was that there was no need for our big shots because there would be no one of corresponding rank among the goshilves. There would be, the news release said, meetings with political bigwigs later. The unspoken qualification was "if it looked safe."

Of course, the biggest surprise came fifteen minutes after the shuttle from the goshilves' ship landed, when the hatch opened and the first aliens stepped out. The arrival was being televised, so everyone saw the "monsters" simultaneously.

None of the gruesome speculations had prepared us for the reality. There weren't little people with large heads and eyes, dressed in silver; bug-eyed monsters; or little green men. What they were was, in many ways, even more frightening. They looked as human as anyone waiting for them to arrive.

I was out there, front and center, part of the official reception committee. When the shuttle door opened, I was only thirty yards away. The first alien appeared in the doorway, in shadow. For a few seconds, all I could see was a vague form. Then he stepped forward, into the sunlight. Like many of the people around me, I suppose that I had been holding my breath, wondering what the goshilves looked like, and uncertain that I wanted to find out at such close quarters. I heard people gasp when the first of them came out where he could be seen. My intestines contracted, momentarily giving me something else to worry about.

"Holy crap," I whispered.

Someone behind me replied with, "Amen."

Hours had been wasted preparing me with ritual greetings, and what I should—and shouldn't—say, the bounds for my spontaneity. I had memorized a few remarks, intending to ignore the coaching and ad-lib the rest. But seeing John Doe step onto the ramp blew everything out of my head.

I thought that I had thrown *them* for a loop with *Alice in Wonderland* and the rest. Brother, was this one-upmanship!

The Marine Corps Band had been playing since the shuttle had landed. The music had become ragged and then stopped when the first alien appeared.

The first alien, male, moved partway down the ramp. Three others—a man and two women—followed. Four of us were supposed to walk to the bottom of the ramp then, and the aliens would come the rest of the way down. Microphones were waiting, and all of the cameras had ranged in on the spot.

I only know from watching the video later that there was a sixty-four-second delay. It took that long for me to get enough of my wits together to start walking forward, and to remind my companions that they were supposed to stay with me.

We reached our positions. The four goshilves came down and took their positions. The world waited. I took a deep breath.

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"Hello, cousins," I said.

It wasn't just that they looked vaguely human. They *were* human. Put them in proper clothes and no one could have ever told the difference. Later, of course, we learned that the similarity extended to the DNA. We were—on any level—the same species. At the time, standing out in the hot Missouri sun, the appearance was enough. I don't think that any of us who were there had any doubt.

All four goshilves were taller and thinner than the averages for people on Earth, but not remarkably so. It turned out that they were also taller and thinner than their stay-at-home relatives. Aboard ship, the goshilves maintained a gravity level 75 percent the level of Earth—or their home planet. And none of the goshilves who came to Earth had ever been on their home planet. The ship had been in transit for nearly two centuries.

Their clothing was different, but not incredibly so. I don't think anyone would have pointed—if they had come across one goshilve somewhere—and said, "That had to come from another world." The four we saw first all wore similar outfits. Essentially, those were jumpsuits, tight at the neck and moderately loose everywhere else. Sleeves came to the middle of the forearms. There were no pockets. Two flaps of cloth hung from waist to mid-thigh like breechclouts. Pouches hanging from belts served in place of pockets or purses. The shoes looked as if they had been molded from plastic.

The nearest of the goshilves blinked after I said, "Hello, cousins." He was six inches taller than me, say six foot three. His hair and eyes were brown, the hair cut very short. I would have guessed his age at about thirty-five, give or take a few years.

After a hesitation of only a few seconds, he nodded. "Hello, cousins," he echoed. He smiled. "That is perhaps the most appropriate greeting, after all."

"We have a lot to talk about," I said.

"We do, indeed," he agreed. "That would be more profitable than standing around here, don't you think?"

That blew all of the ceremonial folderol that politicos and media types love right out the window.

Our first four visitors, like the other three who came off of the shuttle later and the nineteen hundred who remained on the orbiting ship, all had the same surname. Call it Smith, for convenience. Smith is as close as anything, if you throw in five extra consonants without any additional vowels. The first name of their principal spokesperson comes out as something close to Rofgerickhnste; Roger for short.

We walked to the meeting hall, more or less paired up, Roger with me, the others following.

"You could have warned us," I told Roger once the parade was on its way. "Why all of the secrecy?"

"We felt that it would be an unnecessary complication. It did not come as a complete surprise to us, when we first started to intercept your television signals, nearly eighty years ago."

Eighty years of our TV, more years of our radio. It was no wonder that Roger and the others spoke colloquial English—and several other languages—without noticeable accent.

"If you've been observing us that long, it seems remarkable that *Alice in*

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Wonderland was such a surprise," I said. "There have been filmed versions of that. And some of the other stuff we sent you the other day came from television originally."

"It is impossible to monitor everything. And there have been, at times, difficulties in translating signals. We had to improvise, you realize. The results have never been perfect."

By the time we reached the meeting hall, I had nearly managed to forget that Roger was an extraterrestrial. And I had yet to hear anything that made the goshilves hard to understand. Maybe a little anachronistic, but not so different that twenty thousand diplomats and academics should have had so much difficulty. Of course, we were making little more than small talk.

There were microphones and cameras running, so everyone was hearing the same things I was, and more, since they could also hear the conversations going on behind us. The segments of those that I listened to later all seemed stilted. My associates had all chosen to start right in on the things about the goshilves that had puzzled all of the experts.

When we entered the meeting hall, there were people waiting for us, so-called experts and others who were there in support capacities. The four members of each negotiating team were led to a table in the center of the hall, facing each other across six feet of wood—the way we've conducted negotiations for so long. It was all so damn formal, cold—and predictable, right down to the bottles of water and fruit juices.

I pointed those out to Roger and his colleagues. "If you'd like," I added, "I'm sure we could get something with a little more kick to it, beer or something stronger."

"Alcohol?" Roger asked.

"Alcohol," I agreed.

"What would you recommend?"

"All the talking we're going to be doing will be thirsty work," I said. "Cold beer might be best."

"That sounds . . . interesting."

I turned toward the nearest flunky and snapped my fingers, "Set 'em up, barkeep," I said. "Beer, all around."

I knew I would hear about it later, but no one was going to fuss with me while the goshilves—and the press—could listen. The thought of how many tight sphincters I was creating gave the beer extra gusto. I'm not usually a beer drinker, but breaking patterns seemed to be what worked best.

I asked Roger to tell me about his homeworld, even though I knew that he had never seen it. I assumed that tales would have been passed down so that these goshilves would have some sense of *home.* The talk seemed to make them homesick. Roger eventually moved on to more recent reports they had received from the world of their ancestors, the innovations, the "modern" history, stuff that had happened after their ship had started its journey.

"Your world would probably be as alien to you now as Earth must be," I said late in the afternoon. The talk, and the drinking, had been going on for nearly three hours.

"More so," Roger said. "We have had time to study Earth these many years, without the long speed-of-light delay."

I nodded. Then I glanced at my watch. The figures on it had started to blur, but it appeared to be time for this session to end so that we could eat, the goshilves could be shown to their quarters, and the experts could gather like

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sharks in a feeding frenzy to critique my performance. I leaned forward and covered the microphone on the table in front of me, then gestured for Roger to do the same with his.

"All this public stuff isn't going to get us anywhere fast," I said, speaking as softly as I could with some assurance that he would hear me. "Why don't the two of us get together privately this evening, and just talk between us?"

Without hesitation, he said, "That sounds good."

"I'll come over about sunset," I promised.

Then I leaned back, uncovered my microphone, and observed for the record that it was time for the session to end.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?" Howard Bekira demanded when he and my other minders had me alone in the hotel.

"What I felt was right," I replied. "I only got roped into this because my . . . liberated approach offered something your moribund rituals didn't. You wanted me because I don't toe the line or do the expected. Then you want me to toe the line and do the expected. Either get off my back or find someone else."

"You might have endangered everyone on the planet," Kenneal said. "Especially right at the beginning, this is *delicate*."

"Delicate, my ass. The goshilves are people just like us, more like us than we are these days, like we used to be before we all retreated into our private worlds and shut everyone else out." After a pause, I added, "That goes for me too. In some ways I've been worse than most."

"You admit that you can make mistakes," Kenneal said.

"Of course I can make mistakes. I let you people buffalo me into this, didn't I? But while I'm here, I plan to do whatever the hell feels right at the time. The unexpected."

"What was that business at the end?" Carlotta Sanchez asked. "The covered microphones."

"I told him a dirty joke," I said. "I didn't want to offend any sensitive ladies. You want to hear it?" For the first time in our brief acquaintanceship, Carlotta had no reply. She turned away, trying to hide the fact that her face was turning red—with anger, I'm sure, not embarrassment.

"Now," I said, addressing the back of her head, "I'm hungry and I need a shower. Shall we can the bull until later?"

After I showered, I went to the restaurant. I would have preferred to eat in my room, but if I had, it might have proved impossible to slip away afterward. My minders—wardens—would have been camped outside my door, waiting to resume their recriminations, or to bring in experts to go over the day's events and give me unwanted suggestions for the morrow.

I ate, sitting alone at a corner table, ignoring the stares. Maybe I was a freak show to the professional negotiators. I had broken every rule of their diplomatic canon. I had ignored protocol and all of the advice and had just sat there and shot the bull with the *First Representative* of another people. The greater sin was that my approach appeared to be working.

I took a long time over my meal, waiting for sunset. Then I headed toward the rest rooms. There were too many people in the lobby. But there was a rear entrance next to the rest rooms. I ducked out and walked along the side of the building and across the lane to the building where the goshilves were staying.

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There were security people around, but not right at the doors. They obviously had no orders to keep me away from our visitors.

The building was a smaller version of the hotel for our people, with staff to provide whatever our guests asked for. A protocol liaison was sitting in the lobby speaking with two of the goshilves who had not been part of the initial talks.

Roger was across the room, in the corridor leading away from the lobby. Everything had been put on one floor in the goshilves' building, since we hadn't known enough about them to make any other arrangements. Roger came out to meet me halfway.

"Your people have been kind enough to bring in a variety of alcoholic beverages," Roger said after we had said hello. "They had neglected to do so before."

"You asked for alcohol?"

"Yes. It's not unknown among us, but there is not much use of such beverages on our ship."

"I don't drink much myself, or often," I said.

"It was your idea to start sending that unusual material in the last few days?"

"It was," I admitted. "After eighteen months of dry stuff I figured that you might welcome a change."

"You gave our contact council a few bad hours," Roger said, grinning. "We had a carefully-drawn portrait of your people from tens of years of observation and from all of the material you had sent us. Then you reversed spin on the ship."

A bar had been set up in one corner of the dining hall. The man who was tending the spirits had a clearly military look about him. The look he gave me held suspicion. Roger and I ordered drinks. When I asked for scotch and water, he requested the same. I watched the barman mix them.

"Try to get a *little* scotch in the glasses," I said when I saw how light he was making the drinks. "If we had wanted ice water, that's what we would have asked for."

He did everything but growl, but he did put an extra dollop of scotch in each of the glasses.

"A table in the far corner?" Roger suggested when we had drinks in hand.

"That's probably best," I said, wondering how many hidden microphones there were in the room. The suspicious side of me assumed that every inch of the building was bugged worse than a rotting carcass in the summer sun. But maybe, I reasoned, the big shots had been afraid to take a chance at being caught at surreptitious surveillance. After a little thought, I decided that the odds were in favor of fear.

"It seems that much of the past eighteen months have been wasted. We didn't send the right material or ask the right questions," I said once we were seated.

"There may be fault on both sides," Roger said.

"There's so much, I hardly know where to start. You do realize that it was a complete shock to find that you don't look any different from us. We appear to be the same species."

"That is the pattern," Roger said. "Our people have visited three other worlds, similar in size and climate to your Earth. The pattern of life is always the same, on every level."

"That suggests a common source for life on all of these planets," I said.

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"Undoubtedly," he said. "There is no possible alternative."

"You found *intelligent* life on those other worlds?" I asked.

"Intelligent life or the remains of it. On one world, our . . . cousins had not survived."

"There have been times when we worried that *our* survival might be in doubt. A lot of people are still concerned that we might somehow destroy ourselves. And some have started saying that the arrival of your people might be our salvation."

"I don't know how much help we could be. We might have some knowledge that you haven't discovered, but there are limits to our own progress. Once you set up communications with our homeworld, you may find more information that you can use."

"We couldn't send people to another world," I said. "I don't think we could even build a ship the size of yours in the next half century without new engineering techniques."

"We did what we had to do," Roger said. There was something about the way he said that that made me frown in concentration. I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was, though.

We talked, and we drank. The emphasis was on the former. There were a couple of interruptions. One of his people came over with some question, relayed from one of our people. Later, Carlotta came in and asked me to step away and have a few words.

"What are you doing here?" she asked in a forced whisper. "We have a lot of work to do, to get ready for tomorrow, and you're sitting here getting drunk."

"I'm not getting drunk," I said. "And I *am* getting ready for tomorrow. The deeper into his head I get tonight, the easier the rest of this is going to be." She started to say something but I raised my hand, almost to cover her mouth, and stopped her. "My way, remember? That's what this is all about."

Carlotta bit her lip. "Are you getting anywhere?"

"There are at least three other worlds besides Earth and the goshilves' home planet that either have or have had humans on them." That got her off of my back. She couldn't wait to get away to share that news. I went back to the table. Roger had ordered another round of drinks while I was gone.

"Just how many other Earthlike worlds are there within reach?" I asked after checking to make sure that there was a proper amount of scotch in the new drink. "You said that you found three with life like ours on them. Are there more places where you and I could live?"

"Not that our people have been to," Roger said. "In a sphere with a radius of twenty-three light years, we know of only six such worlds. The sixth has not been visited yet. It is my understanding that it will be another twenty of your years before our expedition reaches that system. There may be others. It is difficult to be certain at a distance."

"Are the goshilves the only ones to travel interstellar space?"

"One of the other . . . tribes had just begun to prepare for probes to other stars when we arrived."

Tribes. If we were all the same species, I guess it fit.

"Separate ships to each of those worlds?" I asked.

"Yes."

I got lost thinking about shiploads of people leaving on one-way trips, knowing they would not see the payoff or come home. I know that generation

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ships have been a staple of science fiction for the last century, but this was reality. Maybe the goshilves had blurred views of the difference, but I didn't.

"Why?" I asked.

The pause had gone on too long. "Why what?" Roger asked.

"Why the whole thing? Why do so many of you go off looking for other worlds?"

This time, the pause was his. "We do what we have to do," he said eventually. "When something is necessary, we do it, no matter how inconvenient it might be."

"Who decides?" I asked. I had a notion that I was finally getting to the core of the differences between them and us.

He made a gesture, passing the flat of his hand over the top of his glass. I don't know exactly what it was supposed to mean.

"We reason a question out, then act on the conclusion that we reach, what is best for our people, our world."

"Just like that?"

He gave me a look that was, I assumed, incomprehension.

"You all just look at a problem, figure out the best way to address it, then do it, without argument? And how do you know you've found the right answer?"

"There have been times when we have not found the optimum solution," he said. "But we take the information that we have and make the best available choice. More often than not, it is right. It is workable. It advances us as a people."

"You attack everything the same way?"

"Attack?" He looked over my head. "A novel choice of words," he said after a moment. "Some people have particular talents. We pay attention to those. We reason out matters as best we can. We choose a course of action, or we choose the proper people to investigate and recommend what we should do."

"You get the best people for every job?"

"That is our goal. I believe that we achieve it more often than we fail."

"That sort of thing has been tried here," I said. "It has never worked. Human nature won't allow it. We argue too much, and people think more of their own opinions than anything else. That's what politics and horse races are all about."

"Human nature? Humans and goshilves are the same. It can't be 'nature' unless we both share it."

He had me there.

"We have a saying," I said after a moment. "'My mind is made up, don't confuse me with facts.'"

Roger stared at me. "That is a . . . joke?"

"Unfortunately not. Any serious question drives people to extreme views. They become polarized around the most fanatical adherents on either side. Facts don't mean a damn. Violence is more likely than logic. 'Accept what I say or I'll kill you.'"

Roger continued to stare. I don't know if the look on his face was simple disbelief or something approaching catatonic shock. I sipped at my drink, wondering if I should provide concrete examples. I decided to wait, at least until he showed some sign of paying attention again. I'd have hated to waste my pearls on someone in a trance.

Several minutes passed before he managed a very weak nod. "I suppose there were sufficient hints in the material your people have been sending

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us," he conceded. "There were items that did not seem to make perfect sense in the histories. I begin to see. . . ." But his voice trailed off and he started shaking his head.

"It began, I think, with religion," I said. "Different groups of people each believing that they held the ultimate knowledge of God, no room for compromise, no way to concede any virtue or truth to any other religion without denying their own beliefs. Many of our most destructive wars have been fought because of religion, or with religion as the excuse even when the true reasons were commercial, or nationalistic."

"The goshilves have never had a war," Roger said.

"More power to you," I said, raising my glass. "Your tribe may be peaceful, but mine sure isn't. Haven't you noticed all of the armed guards? That's to make sure that no crazies can get close enough to attack us to 'prove' their point, whatever that might be. And it wouldn't have to be because they felt any animosity toward goshilves, or toward those of us here to talk with you."

"This is more difficult to accept than the adventures of your Alice," Roger said. He took a *long* pull at his drink, and signaled for another round.

"I live in an apartment building in the center of one of the largest cities on this continent. There are barricades outside so that no one can park a powerful bomb close. There are armed guards on the doors, bulletproof shielding. Food and other essentials are delivered by armored cars with heavily armed guards. I go for months at a time without leaving that building. Some of the residents haven't left its protection in more than twenty years. That might not seem long to you, after the generations that your ship has been in transit, but remember, these people don't stay in because they have the vacuum of space around them."

"Then how have you survived?" Roger asked. His voice sounded extremely peculiar, weak but agitated, strained.

"Sheer, blind luck," I said. "And there have been times when we have come close to losing that luck. There's a saying, 'God protects fools and drunks.' I think there must be some truth to that, because we certainly have enough of both of them."

"You are a cynic," Roger announced.

I laughed. "Cynic, iconoclast, gadfly. On Earth, it's hard to be anything but cynical if you're intelligent and honest. In my opinion. We learn our lessons only at the expense of pain and time, and they seldom stick. Ten years later, or twenty, we're ready to make the same mistakes again."

I watched him. And started to worry. Roger appeared to be ready to come apart at the seams. I wasn't sure why *our* difficulties should affect him so, but they obviously did. Since I didn't want to rip him to shreds, I decided that it was time I find something else to talk about.

"There are, however, some things that we are exceptionally good at," I told him. For the next hour, I played commercial spokesman, telling him success stories of invention, creativity, and humanitarianism. We continued to drink, me slowly since I was doing most of the talking; Roger with some speed at first, slowing down only gradually. By the time we called it a night, I think I had given some balance to the tale.

Okay, so I had consumed a bit more booze than I realized. I *thought* that I was thinking clearly, right up to the end of my talk with Roger. My mind seemed to be exceptionally lucid. When I found myself staggering after leaving the building, I decided that maybe I wasn't as sober as I had thought.

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My three harpies (even if only one was female) were waiting out in the street, strung out like gunfighters on the streets of Tombstone. I stopped when I noticed them. For a moment we faced off against each other. Then I moved forward. There was no way I could escape them, not even if I turned and ran.

"You don't look fit for anything," Howard said. Although I had aimed for the middle of the group, for Carlotta, somehow I ended up closest to him. The others closed in.

"Fit enough," I said, straightening up.

"We need a full report on your discussions with the goshilves," Carlotta informed me. "Everything."

"Everything you can remember," R.J. Kenneal said, not hiding his disgust.

"Ah, my fans." I grinned. "Let's just say that Roger now has a more balanced and honest view of us sinful Earth people. You know me, Honest Tony Hampton, always tells it like it is."

Kenneal and Bekira moved to my sides and took me in hand, literally, leading me toward the hotel. Sanchez ran interference and opened doors. We didn't stop until we were in my room.

"Are you sober enough to talk, or do we need to work the booze out of your system first?" Carlotta demanded.

Her associates were still holding my arms. I shook them off, straightened up, and took a deep breath. "I'm sober enough," I assured her. "What do you want to know?"

"What I said before," Carlotta told me. "We need to know everything you discussed with the goshilves."

Waking was not a pleasant process the next morning. I had the mother and father of all hangovers. At first, all that I could think of was my headache and the sick feeling in my stomach. Mankind may have conquered the common cold, but we still haven't beaten the morning after.

While I was in the shower with hot water turning my skin red, my mind got back to the night before. I wasn't thinking about any of the details of what I had told Roger. I hadn't forgotten, or anything like that, I just wasn't up to detailed brain work. But I knew the tenor, and I recalled the looks of horror on the faces of my three minders when I told them.

Oh, well, if they can me, I've still done my duty, made sure that the goshilves know what we're really like. I figured that the odds were overwhelming that I wouldn't be allowed within hailing distance of the aliens again. I was surprised that they hadn't dumped my butt on an airplane while I was unconscious.

"I've been away from home too long already," I decided.

It was after eleven o'clock before I was dressed and feeling marginally human. A handful of pills had helped, thoughtfully provided by my minders, with a note telling me how many to take of each. They were not, separately or in combination, a cure, but they did help.

No morning session had been scheduled. Diplomatic protocol: leave the mornings for sleep, photo ops, and planning. Of course, I hadn't been in much shape for conferences, so I wasn't surprised that I had been allowed to sleep in, especially since I expected—and, in a way, *hoped*—to be dumped from the team.

But not entirely. Once my head was not causing me great anguish, I started to think that I would miss the commotion. I was certainly enjoying my

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conversations with Roger. He appeared to be a kindred spirit, someone I might have more in common with than I did most of the people on Earth.

"Whatever," I said. *I will miss the talks though,* I thought.

I didn't care for the idea of food, but decided that I had better *try* to eat. Waiting for room service might give my stomach time to quiet down, but I didn't know how much time I might have before I was either shipped out or fetched for the next session with the goshilves. The latter was scheduled for one o'clock, the last I had heard.

"Maybe one short drink to get me straight?" I said softly, looking at the bottle of scotch on the sideboard. *Hair of the dog?* I stared at it for a moment, then shook my head.

"I'd better take my chances without." *Start acting as though you're as intelligent as you tell people you are.*

I was just about to leave my room when the knock on the door came. After taking a deep breath, I reached for the knob. I told myself that my hand was shaking because of the drinking I had done the night before, not because I was nervous about what Sanchez and company might have to say. I don't think that I believed that. I've always been a terrible liar.

"I was just on my way downstairs for a meal," I said as the three of them surged toward the open door.

Carlotta raised an eyebrow. "We'll go along. We do need to talk before the afternoon session with the goshilves."

I let out my breath. Apparently, I was not going to be sent packing quite yet.

"The meetings will be a lot more productive if we get rid of some of the formal trappings," I said as they escorted me toward the stairs. "The cameras and microphones, and especially that mammoth table, are inhibiting. These are supposed to be friendly discussions, not peace talks to end World War Three."

"You'd prefer to continue the talks inebriated, I suppose," Kenneal said.

"Not necessarily," I said. "But that gave us the informal conditions we do need. By the way, I hope somebody thought to send Roger the same hangover remedy I found waiting for me. The goshilves don't do much drinking on their ship. They probably don't have anything as effective for the morning after."

"Arrangements were made," Carlotta said through her teeth.

I chuckled softly. "Roger was really putting it away for a while last night."

"So we were informed," Bekira said.

Just before we reached the stairs, I stopped walking and turned so that I was more or less facing my companions.

"Look, what I've been saying about informality is important. The goshilves are a tight little community aboard their ship, nowhere to go and no fresh faces. None of them have been on a planet's surface before. They're like a rural village, if anything like that still exists on Earth. Everybody knows everything about everybody. There's no hierarchy, no ranks, no bigshots and peons. The seven who came down to talk with us were chosen by the group as a whole because they were deemed to be the best for the purpose. They're not professional diplomats or administrators. They're not used to fancypants protocol. They'll be happier, and more receptive, if we treat them like real people instead of headline news."

"They *are* headline news," Bekira said. "This is the biggest thing to happen to Earth in all of recorded history."

"Get your head out of your . . ." I sucked in a deep breath and forced myself

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to be more tactful. "We still don't have to treat them like freaks in a side show, just because they're news. They deserve more consideration than that." I frowned, something vague tickling at the back of my less-than-fully-recovered head. "There's something else to think about. There's something they're being too careful not to say. They're hiding something, and we'll find out what a lot sooner if we continue to keep this as casual as possible."

I finally had the attention of all three of them. The frowns became general. Carlotta was the first to find her voice.

"Hiding something? How do you know? Hiding what?"

"Obviously, I don't know what. As for the how . . ." I hesitated. "While Roger and I were talking, there were several points at which he retreated to saying things like, 'We do what we have to do.' It was almost a mantra, and he always got serious when he said it. If he was from Earth, I'd say that he was trying to rationalize the need to do something unpleasant."

I hadn't had a chance to think this through in advance, or I might have been a little less . . . naked about it. The last thing I wanted was to start a panic, and for a minute, I feared that that was just what I was doing.

"We've got to do something!" Bekira said. "We've got to find out what they're going to do to us and stop them."

"Oh, shut up!" I said. "Don't start being Chicken Little. We don't know that it's anything we'll need to—or want to—stop. I'm sure it's nothing as drastic as an invasion or the destruction of Earth or any of that paranoid nonsense."

"How can you be sure?" Bekira demanded.

"Howard, shut up," Carlotta said, softly, but it had more effect coming from her than it had from me.

"Let's get you your lunch, or breakfast," she said, turning to me. "We'll have to postpone our discussion. What you've said needs . . . consultations."

I bet, I thought, but I just nodded.

I took my time over my meal. At first, I had to force myself to eat. The aroma of food did not sit well on my stomach. Once I got started, it was easier. After that, I dallied because I wondered how long it would take Carlotta to relay what I had said to whoever was in charge and get a decision on how to proceed. Twenty minutes before one I was on my third cup of coffee, finally feeling almost normal, and they had not returned. I started to worry that they might cancel the afternoon session to gain more time to decide what to do. Or that the impresarios of the spectacle might do something foolish.

I have a vivid imagination. I could picture the scenario. A goshilve would disappear. Thugs would work him or her over with drugs and physical torture until there was nothing left to get out of the individual. Then the body would be discovered, with "clear" evidence that the death had been an accident. The body would be too badly damaged for an autopsy to uncover the fact of foul play. Except that, somewhere, a mistake would be made. The goshilves would know what we had done. And we would learn, to our regret, that the aliens had the means to retaliate.

I hoped that my pessimism was merely a lingering legacy of my hangover, but governments were involved, and under any perceived threat, they can be worse than any hangover.

At quarter till one, I got up. I wanted to go upstairs before heading to the meeting hall. I was in the corridor halfway to the stairs when my three minders came back into the hotel, hurrying to catch up with me.

"Hampton!" Sanchez called to get my attention.

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I stopped. I felt a brief fluttering in my chest. Whatever our government had done, or was doing, I was about to find out.

"Well?" I asked as the three got closer.

"You're going to be late for the session," Bekira said.

"I need to go upstairs for a minute. I've still got time. I wasn't even certain that there would be a session."

"Nothing has changed," Carlotta said.

"Oh?" I continued toward the stairs. If I was going to get to my room, do what I had to, and get to the meeting on time, the discussion would have to be on the move. The others followed me. "I figured you had time to screw up everything."

"We can't very well do anything," Kenneal said. It sounded distinctly like a disappointed complaint. "We have to know what they've got up their sleeves first."

"First?" I glanced over my shoulder.

"We need to know what they're not saying," Carlotta said. There was a hint of rebuke in her voice, and I deduced that it was intended for Kenneal rather than for me. For a change.

"If Roger wouldn't spill the beans drunk, there's damn little chance he will sober, not before the goshilves are ready for us to know, and by then it will probably be too late to do anything about it—if any action is necessary," I said. "I'm not certain it will be. This could be something as simple as them not liking to ask for fuel or help with repairs or whatever to let them continue their voyage. I didn't *feel* anything sinister in what Roger was saying, or working hard not to say."

"We need to try," Carlotta said. "You've developed some rapport with their chief spokesperson. Work on it."

I had planned to do that anyway. I just wasn't certain how.

The afternoon meeting started almost on schedule. There hadn't been time to act on my suggestion to get rid of the big table and make things less formal, but I was told that changes would be made by the next day. The goshilves had agreed that something less imposing would be welcome.

While we were settling in, I grinned at Roger and asked, "How's your head?" before we got close to the microphones.

He shook his head gingerly. "It has been better. I had forgotten that effect of alcohol."

"So had I. It's just been within the last hour or so that I started to feel that I might actually survive."

Roger smiled. Whatever else the evening before had done, it had given the two of us a shared experience, some sense of friendly discourse.

"I think we might be able to keep this circus fairly short this afternoon," I told him. Then it was time to start talking for the microphones and cameras.

"These sessions are not the total of our discussions," I said by way of preamble. "Yesterday evening, the chief spokesperson for the goshilves and I had several hours of private talks. These were not substantive. The purpose was to give us a chance to more fully understand each other's people, culture, and needs. At that, I believe we were quite successful."

Roger nodded. It occurred to me then that goshilves gestures were too much like ours for coincidence or shared genesis. It must have been a result of the years they had been studying us.

"We still have a lot to learn from each other," I said, still winging it. *Find*

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out what they're up to. I considered putting my hand over the microphone to ask Roger directly, but after I had done that the day before, I was confident that our hosts had added other means of listening in. The same trick wouldn't work twice. Our next *private* meeting would probably be monitored as well, one way or another. Our people weren't going to leave me any tactful alternatives.

"One phrase did keep repeating itself last night," I said, a halfway signal to Roger that I was about to pull something. " 'We do what we have to do.' That leads to a question that must be on the minds of a great many people on Earth. What are your plans?" Baldly asking the question might not produce a complete or honest answer, but it would give the analysts something to fret over. Besides, it was time for straight questions rather than tiptoeing around everything.

"How long will you stay with us, and where do you go next?"

There was a hint of murmuring on the periphery. I could imagine the broadcast announcers going wild over the questions and speculating on the answers. For a few seconds Roger simply looked at me without blinking. Then he turned to look at his companions. Roger took a slow drink of water then, and sat up a little straighter.

"For all of the generations of our journey," he said, "we have had but one goal, to reach this star system, and this world. We searched for electromagnetic emissions, and we studied what we discovered. The goal remained to get here, to meet our . . . cousins, to exchange knowledge. We have been so completely focused on those goals that we have not begun to plan beyond them. The exchange of knowledge has scarcely begun. What happens when it is finished, I do not know. We have not begun to debate that among ourselves. After our peoples have had more time to get acquainted and complete the exchange of information, we will undoubtedly consult with the people of Earth before we set new goals." He paused and looked around, then returned his gaze to me. He was staring at me when he said, "That is the best answer I can give at this time."

I only believed part of that. What I could not believe is that they had given no thought to what would come next. They had to have at least a slate of options, even if they hadn't started debating them. But I knew that I would get no farther pressing the point in front of microphones and cameras.

Besides, what he had given sounded good enough for the moment. It might take the edge off of the fear I had planted under the duress of a hangover, undo the trouble I had inadvertently caused. At least I hoped it would.

That session was as short as I had hoped. There seemed to be no direction to the proceedings. We all seemed to be waiting for something, and I had no idea what. I didn't try to set up another unofficial meeting, mostly because I didn't think I would be allowed to pull the same trick twice.

"We'll set something up as soon as we can," I told Roger before I left the meeting hall.

Outside, with my three shadows, I heard the latest official "take" on the talks.

"He was still evasive," Kenneal said. "That was a non-answer he gave to your question."

"A dangerous question out in the open like that," Bekira added.

"I think he was being as honest as he could," I said.

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"If their plans were innocuous, there would be no need for subterfuge," Kenneal said. "That makes me nervous."

"Everything makes you nervous, or angry," I said. "Do you make a practice of getting up on the wrong side of bed?"

He didn't bother to reply. And the others maintained their silence until we were inside the hotel and in the big conference room on the ground floor. That hadn't been my choice of destination. Carlotta had given me no choice.

"We'll have supper brought in," she said. "This is liable to take some time."

It did. I didn't have just the three musketeers to deal with, but twenty or thirty others, in shifts. Everyone had questions. During supper I did more talking than eating, and for a time I wondered if breakfast would find me still talking around the circles the experts and diplomats kept steering. They wanted verbatim reports on the evening before, which I couldn't have supplied even if I had been sober during the long talk with Roger. They wanted nuances, tone of voice, body language, inferences, deductions, opinions.

"You're wasting time," I said. "Even if you bring out the rubber hoses, I've given you everything I can. You can't expect the goshilves to act as if they had been diplomats on Earth for the last two hundred years. They don't have the background, the training, or the history for your phony posturing."

Finally, I just got up and started for the door.

"We're not finished," Carlotta said. There was another group of people coming in to talk with me.

"I'm finished," I said. "I don't give a damn what you do, I'm done with this idiocy."

Kenneal and Bekira moved to block my route to the door. I had to stop again, but not for long. "I'm finished," I repeated. "And if you don't get the hell out of my way, I'm done for good. You can all go to hell."

They looked to Sanchez for instructions. I didn't bother to look. The men got out of my way.

I finished the scotch in my room. There wasn't much left, but it dulled my anger. I was so angry that I couldn't think straight, and I needed to think. The hours with Earth's so-called experts had done nothing but rob me of patience. I hadn't been able to follow a train of thought past the first station before one of the suits hit me with another question.

The first two drinks went down fast. There was enough scotch left for one more. I fixed that, then sat at the table by the window. I had turned the lights out and the curtains open.

"What options do they have?" I asked myself silently. "What are their choices?" It wasn't hard to compile a list.

1 - They turn around and go back to their own world.

2 - They move on to look for another world like Earth.

3 - They stay here.

"If they stay here, under what conditions will it be?" I asked myself. *As guests, or as conquerors?* What kind of power might they have, what technologies beyond the fact that they could build ships to carry thousands of people for generations? Did they have extreme weapons, flotillas of advanced fighters to take over the skies of Earth, battalions of trained soldiers?

"*We do what we have to do,*" Roger had said. It had sounded ominous after all of the repetitions. It sounded more so now.

Or am I just starting to think like all of the idiots around me? I wondered. "Is paranoia contagious?" I asked the darkened room. If there *were* micro-

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phones planted—as I assumed—let my wardens make what they wanted of that.

Thinking about the idiots—the gathered diplomatic prowess of Earth—brought another worry to mind. *If the governments do get paranoid about the goshilves, could they be stupid enough to try to destroy their ship?*

The follow-up question—*Do we have the ability to do something like that?*—was beyond my knowledge. All I could do was worry about it.

The next three days left me feeling increasingly jittery—not about the designs of the goshilves, but about the possible reactions of Earth. The talks continued. A second goshilve shuttle came down. It brought a few trinkets, and more people to talk. The mammoth table in the meeting hall had been replaced by a series of smaller tables and informal living room type settings—easy chairs around coffee tables.

At least it shows that the idiots are still listening to some *of my advice,* I told myself. That wasn't much comfort.

After six days of worrying what our governments might do, I was nearly a basket case. I had just about given up trying to figure out what the goshilves still weren't talking about. I didn't have the energy to gnaw at both bones.

The following morning—we had moved to two sessions a day after the arrival of the second shuttle—I knew I had to do something different again. "Let's take a walk," I suggested to Roger as the morning session ended.

He nodded. Outside the meeting hall, we turned away from the buildings, toward the landing strip.

"As long as we're facing away from everyone, they won't be able to read lips, and shotgun microphones might miss what we say," I said once we were twenty yards beyond the building.

"You think that might be important?" Roger asked.

"I don't know. I just know that it isn't something I feel comfortable about."

"I've noticed that something has been bothering you," Roger said. We were aimed, more or less, toward one of the goshilve shuttles. "Something is wrong?"

"I don't even know that for certain," I admitted. "What I do know is that some of our government people are becoming increasingly suspicious because they feel that you might not have been . . . completely candid when you said that your people had not even started to discuss what you're going to do next."

"It is the truth."

"Even I find that it stretches credibility to think that you have taken no thought for your next steps. You must have some sense of your options even if you truly haven't started debating which to choose. And I'm far less suspicious than many of the governmental folks who will make any decisions for Earth."

"A small child could list the different things we *could* do," Roger said. "That does not detract from the truth of my statement the other day. We are still learning, still teaching, getting to know your people. We have not begun considering which options are viable, let alone debate their relative merits."

"Governmental paranoia is a normal condition for us," I said. "With all of our television signals that you intercepted, you must have seen some of the old movies about aliens invading Earth. Those were very popular back in the 1950s, and those movies continue to run on television. They have been especially popular in the last eighteen months."

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"We have seen some of those," Roger conceded.

I stopped walking.

"The longer Earth goes without any convincing evidence that your intentions are completely benign, the worse the paranoia will become. I suspect, though I do not know, that there must already be military types who are advocating defensive measures."

"You think we might be attacked?" There is no way I could overstate the disbelief in Roger's voice.

"Eventually it might come to that," I said. "The longer there is uncertainty, the more powerful any voices that suggest that you are here to conquer Earth, or that perhaps you are merely the first element in a massive invasion, will sound to the people who make the decisions."

"There is no logic to that."

"The only logic that enters into the equation here is the logic of how many voters will believe what."

"How could so few of us pose any threat to the billions of inhabitants of this world? Even if we had sophisticated weapons and no compunctions about using them, we could never control an entire world. It would be suicidal to attempt that. And we do not have weapons of that nature, of any nature."

No death rays, mind control devices, or any of the other paraphernalia of those old Cold War movies? I had seen dozens of those films while I was growing up. And when I started my college studies, I had looked into the historical milieu during which they were made. But it would have taken too long to explain the context to Roger.

"My advice would be to find some way to reassure people of that," I said. "I'm sure some of our other negotiators have made this suggestion already, but it might be time for you to invite some of us up to visit your ship."

"It has always been our intention to offer such tours," Roger said. "We can start as soon as arrangements can be made."

"You don't have to clear that decision with anyone?"

"No. It is understood that I will do whatever must be done."

There was that phrase again.

"I hope that you will be one of the first," Roger continued. "In fact, since we are so close, perhaps you would like to take a look inside one of our landers now?"

I had toured many human spacecraft in virtual reality, all of the historic models back to the first one-man capsules and many more designs created for use in real space or computer games. I had sought out people who hoped to be the architects of Earth's next push outward, the thinkers who wanted us to take up the challenge again and start using the rest of our solar system. Until the coming of the goshilves, those people had been among the lost souls of Earth, unheeded by the majority, considered part of the lunatic fringe by many. What need would outer space fill? What could justify the risks?

Now we knew some of the answers. The pariahs were finally coming into their own . . . when it might be too late.

None of my virtual excursions had prepared me for actually stepping into a spacecraft. The main impression I had was of how cramped it was. I could understand why so few goshilves had come down in each of the craft. It wasn't until nearly the end of my ten minutes inside the shuttle that it occurred to me that I wasn't thinking in enough dimensions. In space, in zero gravity, all of the surfaces were available.

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My only other clear impression was of a vague odor, something I couldn't identify, or even describe. It was not sufficiently close to anything I knew. It was like the old conundrum: "How would you describe the taste of a banana to someone who had never eaten one?"

"How many of these things do you have?" I asked when we were ready to leave the shuttle.

"I don't know the exact number," Roger said. "It must be on the order of about twenty though."

"Not enough to get everyone off in case of emergency?"

"Nowhere near that," he said. "There is little chance of any such emergency though, and there would be no place for us to go, except while we are near a habitable planet. And for generations that has never been the case."

I told him about the *Titanic,* without enough lifeboats for all of its crew and passengers.

"There would be no one to rescue us in interstellar space," Roger said.

"We want you to take all of the photographs you can," Carlotta told me before I went up to the spaceship. "There is a camera built into each of these shirts. The lenses are concealed in the top buttons. The memory wafers sewn into the fabric each hold sixty-four images, and there are four wafers in each shirt."

"They will work in any available light," Howard added.

I took one of the two shirts and inspected it carefully. I knew that there were extremely sophisticated spy devices available, but this was the only chance I had ever had to handle one of the most advanced. I could not detect any of it, not the lens or the location of the memory wafers.

"I never signed on to be a spy," I said. This was an argument I didn't expect to win, but I had to go through the motions. "I don't like the idea of betraying the trust that Roger has in me for no real purpose."

"There is purpose," Kenneal said. "We have to insure the survival of the human race."

"Where are the recorders hidden?" I asked. Up to that point, I had been wearing my own clothes, and doing everything I could to make sure that I was not harboring bugs. The reactions to my clandestine conversations with Roger had been evidence enough—for me—that I had not yet been tapped.

"We don't need sound recordings for this," Bekira said—far too quickly.

"Yeah, and did you see the pigs flying over the meeting hall?" I asked.

"All you need to concern yourself with is taking photographs of as much of the ship as you can," Sanchez said.

"Me and the others who are going up?"

No one bothered to answer that.

I was more than a little nervous about the trip to the spaceship. "Scared out of my mind" would not be too much of an exaggeration. There were eight Earth people making the trip in two shuttles, with six goshilves, three in each craft.

The shuttle took off horizontally. Roger had explained that we would make a complete orbit of Earth, but I had little chance for sightseeing. There were only two small portholes in the cabin, and I would have had to get out of my safety harness to look through either of them. I was not eager to attempt maneuvering in zero gravity after the shuttle quit accelerating and started to coast around the world for its rendezvous.

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"I suspect that this visit will answer many of your questions," Roger said halfway through the trip.

"I hope it answers everyone's questions," I said, conscious of the spy shirt I was wearing, and not wanting to get into anything that I might not want the rest of the world to hear. If we got near anything like that, I would have to take off my shirt and take Roger away from any of the other Earth people. I had time to wonder, with minimal amusement, what the goshilves might think if I did a partial striptease.

"Would you like to go up to the flight deck and watch our rendezvous?" Roger asked fifty minutes into the flight. "You might find it interesting, if not instructive."

I had mixed thoughts. A view of the goshilve ship as we approached might show whether there were weapons mounted, a better view than we had from Earth-based or satellite telescopes and cameras. But making that trip, even though it was no more than fifteen feet, would mean getting out of my safety straps.

"The lack of gravity is not that much of a problem," Roger said, correctly deducing the reason for my hesitation.

I took a deep breath before I unfastened the belts.

The goshilve ship was a behemoth. Intellectually, I had known that it was huge, larger than anything that humans had ever constructed on Earth except for the Great Wall of China. Even so, actually seeing it like that was awe inspiring. Frightening.

I stood—floated—behind one of the pilots, holding the back of his seat with both hands. I suspect that it would have taken a crowbar and considerable effort to pry me loose. I didn't speak. My teeth were firmly pressed together, to the point that my jaw ached.

Just a few minutes short of rendezvous, Roger suggested that we return to our seats. "We have some maneuvering to do now, and it could be tricky if we're not secured."

I did not keep my eyes closed throughout the maneuvering to dock with the ship. I did keep a firm grasp on the armrests of my seat, and made certain that the safety straps were as tight as I could bear. Thrusters were fired. I felt the sensation of returning weight, pressing me first in one direction and then in the opposite one. Finally, we moved sideways.

"The retractor arms have us now," Roger said.

It was only partially an explanation. The rest of it had to wait. Two large grapples came out of the docking bay to collect the shuttle and pull it inside.

"We'll have to wait a couple of minutes, until the hangar is pressurized," Roger said.

There was a more constant sensation of weight after the ship's retractor arms had us in their grip. Down was below my feet again. Up was over my head. I had not realized before that the goshilve ship was spinning. The rotation gave the ship the equivalent of about three-quarters of Earth gravity.

"Living constantly in zero gravity would have presented insurmountable problems," Roger said when I asked him about it. "Our species was not evolved for that condition."

"I know." I mentioned what I knew about our experiences with astronauts in zero gravity. I felt like a school kid coming up with an answer that the teacher hadn't expected me to know.

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Substituting spin for gravity is not a perfect alternative. Moving either fore or aft, I had a tendency to drift with the spin and kept bumping into bulkheads and anything else in the way. Before long I felt slightly dizzy. It was like trying to walk on the ground, in the real world, after a long and active session in virtual reality—almost like being drunk. I did everything but puke, and I came close to that.

My discomfort didn't stop me from continuing the tour for as long as possible. I wanted to see everything that my hosts would show. Before I was done, I knew what it was that the goshilves needed most, if not how they hoped to get it.

Like everyone else, I had been awed by the sheer dimensions of the ship. It was gargantuan. There seemed to be more than enough room for nineteen hundred people. But the raw data had been misleading. The ship was more than a mile in length, but subtracting the shield in front and the main drive at the back cut that length by 40 percent. A thick hull and plenty of equipment, storage, and control spaces reduced the cubic volume available for people even more.

The goshilves were not packed as tight as sardines, but the accommodations made my apartment look as spacious as Buckingham Palace. A family of four (Roger said that there were no families larger than that aboard) had two rooms—no more than 130 square feet. That's not much to spend a lifetime in, and generations of goshilves had already done just that.

They needed room to live.

"How can you handle that kind of crowding?" I asked Roger after we were back on the shuttle returning to Missouri. His answer didn't surprise me at all.

"We do what we have to do."

"Wouldn't it have been easier to start with fewer people, and keep the population down?"

This time he hesitated before he answered. "The number was chosen because of what our geneticists considered the minimum necessary to assure that the gene pool was sufficiently varied to sustain an independent colony if we happened to locate a world not populated by our kind."

"And Earth is populated by your kind, our kind," I said.

Roger made no reply. I waited a moment before I spoke again. It was time to return to the big questions.

"So what do you do, move on and look for another world like Earth and hope that you find one that isn't populated?"

"If that is what we have to do," Roger said.

"But you would rather not?"

"As I told you, we have not discussed plans. Speaking for myself, and for those few who have expressed preferences in my hearing, you are correct. I would rather remain on Earth."

"Supposing, just for the sake of argument, that you all decided that you want to stay here and arrangements were made. I doubt that there would be much difficulty getting an invitation. What would happen to your ship?"

"It would cease to be of concern to us. I imagine that we would offer it to the people of Earth, in exchange for our new homes. Your people could make the next voyage, continue the search for other worlds . . . for more cousins, if you chose to."

If I hadn't been strapped in my seat, I would have danced a jig. "You know something?" I grinned. "I think we've solved everyone's problems."

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The political debate lasted months, but the result was a forgone conclusion. We even discovered one area of technology where Earth was far ahead of the goshilves—a technology that would make the ship a lot less crowded for us. The goshilves had never developed the techniques of freezing embryos.

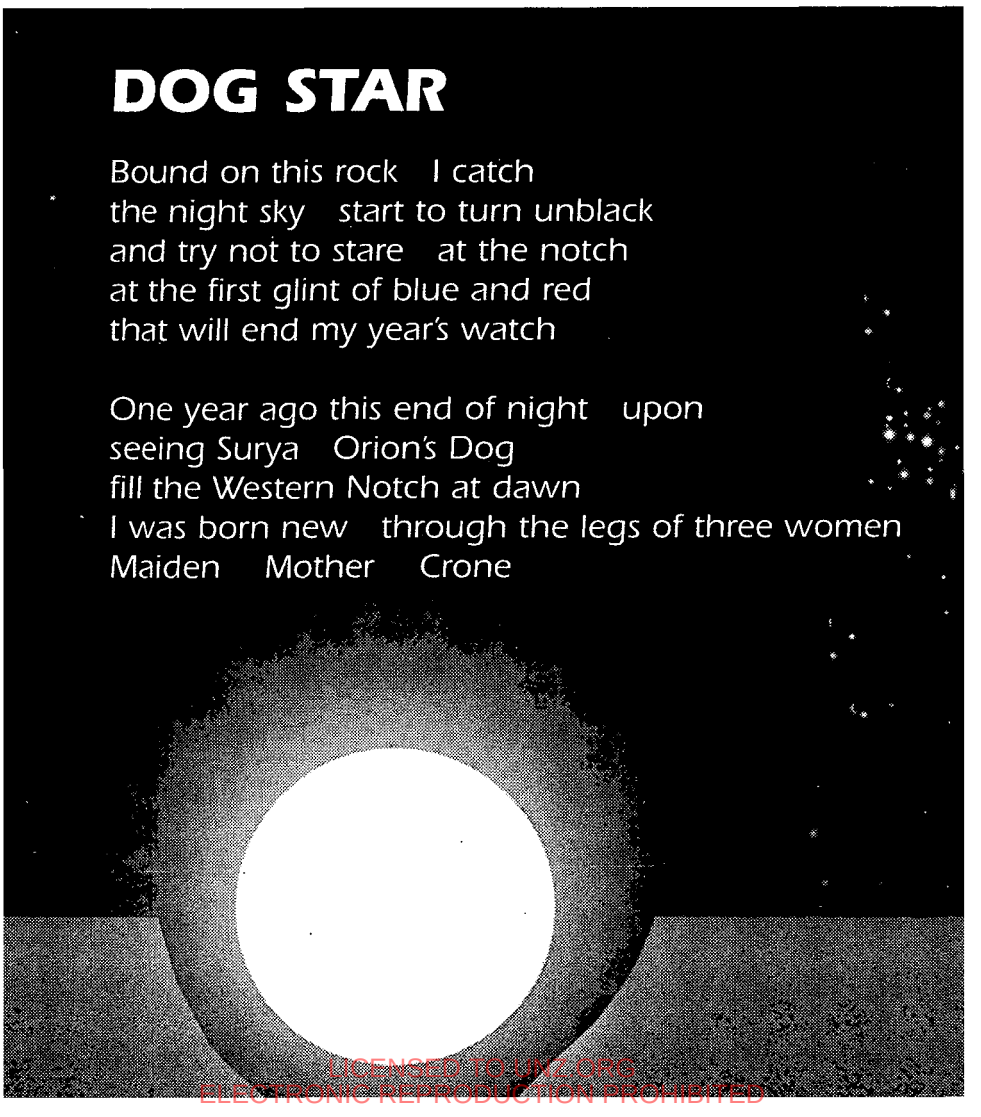
Eight hundred Earth-humans will go, along with sixty goshilves who want to continue the quest and who can help teach us how to run the ship, and how to survive the journey. They will carry several thousand potential extra humans along, much more variety in the gene pool, whenever they get where they're going.

They, not we. Life is beginning to get interesting for a gadfly on Earth. The 1840-odd goshilve immigrants are stirring things up nicely. I wouldn't miss it for a hundred worlds. O

DOG STAR

Bound on this rock I catch
the night sky start to turn unblack
and try not to stare at the notch
at the first glint of blue and red
that will end my year's watch

One year ago this end of night upon
seeing Surya Orion's Dog
fill the Western Notch at dawn
I was born new through the legs of three women
Maiden Mother Crone



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Hot and rank and slippery with blood
Drunk on incense and wine I was
pulled through their squatting womanhood
pulled into the chanting line
while the dance spiraled outward

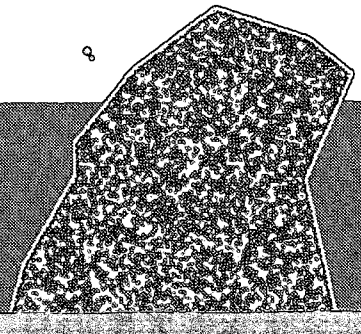
Blessed for a year Boy-King's choice
of meat of girls of women
of skins of weapons of toys
at the center of ceremony
always my bright cape my voice

Five sons and four daughters born
and two nurslings who died on this rock
and twelve more yet to spawn
before my last widow gives birth
before the Dog sets with the dawn

But now the dance spirals in
leads the new Boy-King
toward the three women
who squat by the fire waiting
Maiden Mother Crone

and I pray to the Horned One
let me see first light from the star
not see the priest when he comes
behind me in his finery
with his golden blade undone

—Joe Haldeman



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ON BOOKS

Norman Spinrad

THE PULP TRADITION

THE AVRAM DAVIDSON TREASURY
Robert Silverberg and Grania Davis
Tor, $23.95

THE GOOD OLD STUFF
Edited by Gardner Dozois
St. Martin's Griffin, $15.95

NIGHT LAMP
by Jack Vance
Tor, $23.95

PORTS OF CALL
by Jack Vance
Tor, $24.95

O PIONEER!
by Frederik Pohl
Tor, $21.95

WHITE LIGHT
by William Barton and Michael Capobianco
Avon EOS, $13.00

NOTHING BURNS IN HELL
by Philip Jose Farmer
Forge, $22.95

I have seldom if ever reviewed anthologies or collections of short stories in these pages, but this has not been because I deem them insignificant. Far from it. Rather than being the result of my taking the short forms lightly, it has been the result of my inability to figure out quite how to review a series of short stories within the essay format I have set out for myself here.

Now, however, I have before me two books of stories, an anthology and a single author collection, which I have chanced to read in succession—*The Good Old Stuff*, edited by Gardner Dozois, and *The Avram Davidson Treasury*, edited by Robert Silverberg and Grania Davis. Which, taken together, open the door to a discussion far larger than their individual stories or even the two individual volumes, a discussion which, in one form or another, has been going on inconclusively for decades, but which now, it seems to me, has taken on heightened importance.

Both of these books of stories are retrospectives. Both of them seek to preserve an aspect of speculative fiction's literary heritage. Both of them to that extent perform a service to the field, to readers present and, hopefully, future.

But what they seek to preserve could not be more different. Indeed the two things they seek to preserve are, I would contend, antithetical, an antithesis that lies at science fiction's core.

Gardner Dozois wisely prefaces his own preface to *The Good Old Stuff* with a quote from an Algis Budrys column of 1977 that I in turn feel I must quote here:

> We say, in short, that we grew from the pulps to *Astounding*, and from *Astounding* into our present enlightenment. These are lies. We read the pulps and *ASF* simultaneously and with equal voracity, they were two sides of the one coin, and our special relationship with the pulps was more intriguing, racier, and in some ways more genuine, while our relationship with *Astounding* was respectable. And our present enlightenment, which will no doubt dim in the hindsight of years to come, derives not linearly from *ASF* but

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from a complex action of the love/hate relationship between the pulps and "modern science fiction" within ourselves.

In his preface and in his selection of stories, Dozois, at least herein, comes down squarely on the side of the pulps, for that is his avowed purpose here, to collect, preserve, and pass on to current generations, what he variously calls "Space Adventure" or "Space Opera" stories of the period 1948 to 1975.

Dozois has chosen an interesting assortment of famous classics, typical tales, and Space Adventures written by writers either not primarily known for their space opera or who do not deserve to be.

"Semley's Necklace" by Ursula K. Le Guin, for example, is an early alien planet adventure story, somewhat purpler than most of her oeuvre, and hardly typical of the writer she would become. "The Sky People," by Poul Anderson, is a future Earth combat story not likely to be the sort of thing Anderson himself would choose to be remembered by. "That Share of Glory" is certainly atypical minor C.M. Kornbluth. Ditto Brian W. Aldiss' "A Kind of Artistry" or Gordon Dickson's "The Man in the Mailbag" or Fritz Leiber's "Moon Duel."

There is a typical James H. Schmitz, a typical L. Sprague de Camp, a typical Murray Leinster, a typical Leigh Brackett, a typical H. Beam Piper, a typical Jack Vance.

There are also well-remembered classics: "The Rull" by A.E. Van Vogt, "Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons" by Cordwainer Smith and "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth" by Roger Zelazny. Plus one story that deserves to be, and for my money is the best story in the book, "Mother in the Sky with Diamonds" by James Tiptree, Jr.

As Isaac Asimov was fond of saying: "The Golden Age of Science Fiction is twelve."

A throwaway line perhaps, but as profound as Budrys' contention, and even more subtle. Like one's first experience of sex, one's early adolescent encounter with the wonders of science fiction is a uniquely profound one, the profundity of which is independent of the artistic level of the performance.

And just as doing it in the back seat of a car or behind the barn again may lack the piquancy of The First Time if attempted decades later by mature adults, one re-reads one's early adolescent loves with a certain peril.

Several of these stories were ones that I avidly read as a wide-eyed adolescent, others inspired me as a beginning writer, and of the rest in this volume, several were written by writers I have long admired.

Re-reading most of these stories now was for the most part a saddening experience. They just do not stand the test of time and maturity, speculative fiction's and my own. They are much more golden in adolescence's memory lane than reincarnated in cruel black and white upon the currently printed page.

A.E. Van Vogt's "The Rull," remembered as a masterpiece of the confrontation of human and alien consciousnesses, turns out to be structured as a series of action-loops, each resolved, by Rull or human, along the line of "and then he pulled another rabbit out of his space-helmet," building up to "and then he built a blaster out of toothpicks and paper-clips with which he conquered the universe" at the end.

"The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth," remembered as Roger Zelazny at the top of his witty, sardonic, poetic, adventurous form, stands nakedly revealed as a rather overwritten and obvious pastiche of Melville's *Moby Dick* and Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea.*

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Most disillusioning of all, perhaps, was re-reading "Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons," a story I remembered as one of my all-time favorites, by Cordwainer Smith, who I have long regarded as a master.

The inventiveness is there, the color, the flash, but the prose-line is at times horrendously repetitive, the main character a cardboard villain, the thematic point non-existent, the action takes place at an uninvolved remove, the story has no deep structure, and the plot resolution, such as it is, is telegraphed halfway through.

And so it goes. L. Sprague de Camp's "The Galton Whistle" is lightly amusing but stilted, and glaringly and embarrassingly phallocratic to the modern reader, even the modern male reader. The Kornbluth is Kornbluth at his atypical worst, the sort of planetary adventure story one imagines him cranking out at flank speed to pay the overdue rent. The Le Guin, though more carefully written, is little more than a latter day version of the same.

And so on. And so forth.

Action adventure SF. Space Opera. Space Adventure. The Pulp Tradition.

Speaking Asimov's words of wisdom: "The Golden Age of Science Fiction is twelve."

Let it be.

Are there no stories in *The Good Old Stuff* that held up for me?

Yes there are.

"The Last Days of Shandaker" may be typical Leigh Brackett, may be the old dying Martian civilization stuff one has read scores of times, but unlike, say, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Brackett can *write*. Her sentences have rhythm, they have color, they sing. In hindsight, Brackett's Mars may be a science fictional recreation of the western romantic image of fallen Egypt, but that itself, whatever else it was, was an adult esthetic with depth of feeling, and Brackett does bring an adult sensibility to what in other hands has been adolescent adventure material, and thus is able to touch the heart and spirit.

But Gardner, why this, and not "Shambleau"?

"The New Prime" is typical Jack Vance of the period and hardly Vance even near the top of his form, and yet it holds you, not so much with its inventiveness and color, although Vance always has that, but with its witty, erudite, sophisticated prose at the service of Vance's rapier-pointed and omnipresent irony.

But for me, the best story in the anthology is one that, in the terms Gardner Dozois sets out here, doesn't seem to belong in the book at all, James Tiptree, Jr.'s "Mother in the Sky with Diamonds."

Okay, so it takes place in the Asteroid Belt and the Outer Satellites, and there is quite a bit of physical action, so I suppose at least in *those* terms it technically qualifies as "Space Adventure."

But "Space Opera"?

The very title deliberately evokes not opera but rock and roll, and not the adolescently jejune rock and roll of the fifties but the sophisticated rock of the Beatles and its lysergic sensibility.

And the story itself more than lives up to it. This is hardly "Space Opera" or "Space Adventure," it is very much New Wave era speculative fiction that happens to be set in space and involve physical violence, and in fact, it was published in 1971.

The Good Old Stuff is subtitled "Adventure SF in the Grand Tradition," Budrys' "pulp tradition," a tradition I would contend is not grand at all, and a tradition to which both Algis Budrys and Gardner Dozois, both writers of sophisticated prose, both writers of intellectual and characterological depths, have not exactly dedicated the bulk of their own oeuvres.

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If there is a literary lesson in *The Good Old Stuff,* it is that the writers who produced works of genuine worth and staying power within its commercial parameters were those who managed, one way or another, to *transcend* the pulp parameters.

The very fact that "Pulp Tradition" and "Space Adventure" are generally recognized as two terms for essentially the same parameters nails it, points out forthrightly that this was—and to the extent that such markets persist still is—a set of *commercial constraints* and not a set of literary values.

A heroic figure with whom the unsophisticated reader can psychologically identify. Evil antagonists for the hero to overcome. Exotic settings. A plot-line heavy on physical confrontation and fight scenes. A climax resolved through combat of one form or another.

You will notice that these are the parameters for all sorts of "pulp fiction," that is, the sort of fiction published in the "pulp magazines" from say World War I up into the early 1950s, detective stories, westerns, African adventure, and so forth, as well as "Space Adventure."

These were the commercial requirements for selling to these markets, and they had nothing to do with literary values like thematic content, quality of prose, depth and sophistication of characterization, historical and/or speculative vision, irony, formal structure, and so forth.

It is sometimes contended—and not without a certain justification—that what the Pulp Tradition had that so much modern "mainstream" and even modern "science fiction" lacks is *story.*

This is true in the sense that there is an awful lot of empty well-written stuff out there that employs sophisticated literary technique to obfuscate the fact that it lacks a compelling tale that truly touches the human heart.

But it is also true that the Pulp Tradition all-too-frequently employs the much more primitive smokescreen of the tension-release-tension-release manipulative psychological sine-wave of the formulaic action-adventure plotline to hide the very same void.

Is then the Pulp Tradition a foolproof formula for crap?

No, not any more than the postmodern literary parameters are a fool-proof formula for spiritually empty theoretical constructs.

If there is nothing *more* than the fulfillment of either set of parameters, the result is vapidity.

But it is certainly possible to fulfill all the pragmatic commercial parameters of the so-called Pulp Tradition and produce work of genuine literary interest and value by giving the reader *more.*

As Jack Vance, for ideal example, has been doing for about half a century.

No writer better fulfills the requirements of the Pulp Tradition than Vance. No one is better at creating outré and exotic settings in extravagantly baroque and telling detail. No one is better at tossing off well-realized and bizarre future societies with casual bravado, as in the recent *Night Lamp,* for example, or in the latest, *Ports of Call,* where he throws them at you one after the other with both hands. Plenty of physical action. Plenty of jeopardy and escape.

If the Pulp Tradition has an ideal exemplar, it is Jack Vance. Hardly anyone has been at it longer and no one fulfills the parameters better. With what seems like and may be effortless ease.

But that is like saying Herman Melville knew how to spin a whaling tale. True enough as far as it goes.

Vance, like Melville, transcends genre parameters, not by defying them, but by fulfilling them in the

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process of giving the reader much, much more.

Vance is arguably, or rather, for my money, inarguably the best prose stylist yet produced not only by the "Pulp Tradition" but by speculative fiction as a whole. Vance's command of the English language, its rhythms, its vocabulary, its structure, the psychic import of its phonemes, is so complete that I wonder if it is really hyperbole to say that he could write the twenty-second century Martian phone book and make it entertaining.

Upon meeting Vance, one of the first get-acquainted questions he asked me was "What instrument do you play?" His being the cornet, his favored musical métier jazz, and his assumption being that any civilized person should have *some* means of musical expression.

Which, in this distant critical retrospect, is quite instructive, for Vance indeed plays the English language like a jazz musician; tone, and color, and rhythm being at least as important as the melody line. For Vance, the science fictional jazz musician, the storylines of the Pulp Tradition are the given, the old tunes upon which to improvise his variations, blow his unique riffs.

But there is even more to Vance's prose than that, for the very texture of it, phrase by phrase, expresses his characteristic mordant irony, his skeptical sardonic opinion not merely of humanity but of sentient consciousness in general. Stripped of the baroquely refined elegance of its expression, Vance's philosophic stance would stand revealed as being as misanthropically cynical as that of late Mark Twain, but Vance's prose enables it to glide down much more smoothly.

And that is the ultimate triumph of Vance's style—that it is no mere pyrotechnic display of skill in the service of nothing in particular, but the finely honed instrument for the perfected expression of an adult, sophisticated, complex, sardonic but not world-weary creative consciousness.

Am I actually contending that Jack Vance is a more accomplished prose stylist than *Mark Twain,* a writer I greatly admire?

Yes I am, and I believe that an open-minded comparison of any randomly selected samples of the two writers' work will prove it.

Thus does Jack Vance, the perfect exemplar of the Pulp Tradition, who has worked so long within its commercial restraints that he has perhaps internalized them as formal givens, nevertheless transcend them to produce true literary art.

This, though, should not be taken as a defense of the supposed virtues of the commercial constraints of the Pulp Tradition. Far from it. Vance succeeds in spite of them, not because of them. The Pulp Tradition has produced far more literary tragedy than literary triumph.

For case in point, I offer the valedictory collection of another of speculative fiction's greatest stylists which I chanced to read at roughly the same time as *The Good Old Stuff, The Avram Davidson Treasury,* edited by Robert Silverberg and Grania Davis, with introductions to the stories by an impressive panoply of diverse hands.

Only one story in *The Good Old Stuff,* the Van Vogt, is copyrighted earlier than 1950 and that in 1948, and the time-line goes all the way up to the 1975 Le Guin. The posthumous Davidson collection is divided up into decades, starting in "The Fifties" and running through "The Eighties and Nineties," so in a certain sense it is fair to compare at least the contents of the first half of *The Avram Davidson Treasury* with the contents of *The Good Old Stuff.*

In another sense, though, it is

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about as fair as shooting fish in a barrel with a howitzer.

I read many of the Davidson stories as a teenager and young writer too. But unlike the sadly disillusioning experience of re-reading most of the stories in *The Good Old Stuff* from the same period, the Avram Davidson stories read *better* now than they did then, every damn one of them. Instead of deteriorating into vinegar after a while like badly bottled plonk, they improve with age like a noble vintage.

Or, let's be realistic about it, my ability to appreciate them has evolved beyond the literary taste of a teenager guzzling pulp Ripple.

Avram Davidson's artistic love was speculative fiction. Indeed, with Avram, all fiction became speculative somehow when lensed through his uniquely erudite, convoluted, and prismatic prose and strangely twisted sensibilities. And so because he lacked luck, publishing street smarts, and a cunning agent, he was constrained to publish his work almost entirely in markets informed by the "Pulp Tradition."

But Avram Davidson was innocent of the literary constraints of the Pulp Tradition.

How much of an innocent?

One of the things that SF writers did to keep financially afloat in the 1940s and 1950s was to bat out so-called non-fiction for "adventure pulps" like the old *Argosy* with titles like "Sex-Crazed Nazi Weasels Ripped My Flesh" or "Revenge of the Man-Eating Slugs of Borneo." The word rate was low, and SF writers reamed this stuff out as fast as possible off the tops of their heads.

Avram Davidson tried it too.

Carefully searching historical records for stories and obsessively researching the details to assure scholarly accuracy.

Avram Davidson may have been *published* for decades primarily in pulp magazines demographically aimed at teenagers and callow youth, but Avram *wrote* for not merely adult sensibilities, but for sophisticated adult sensibilities, erudite adult sensibilities, even.

Back in my teens and twenties, when I read many of the stories in both books in question for the first time, I enjoyed the stuff in *The Good Old Stuff* more than anything I was reading by Avram Davidson. I just wasn't ready to fully appreciate this level of literature.

And neither, at least until the middle of the 1960s and perhaps far beyond, were most SF readers nurtured on, but not ever really weaned from, "Adventure SF in the Grand Tradition."

And there is the tragedy of it.

Commercially speaking, the work of Avram Davidson was never the sort of thing destined to achieve wide popularity among the readership of the sort of magazines and books in which it was generally published, as witness, mea culpa, that when my jejune tastes were primarily informed by the sort of thing that did, I didn't much appreciate it either.

So Avram Davidson pretty much lived and died in genteel scholarly poverty, a commercial failure.

Literarily speaking, the stories of Avram Davidson do not belong in the pulp canon at all. In absolute literary terms, they are much closer to the works of Donald Barthelme, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Bernard Malamud, or Jorge Luis Borges, and yes, in absolute literary terms, they stand up quite well in such company.

But because Avram never escaped from the déclassé taint of the SF markets in which he was published, he never was admitted into the literary company in which he belonged either, and thus his work has not yet reached the readership for which it is really intended, the readership that would most enjoy it.

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A tragedy for Avram Davidson, but also a tragedy for such readers who remain ignorant of work that would give them great pleasure.

Budrys speaks of "the love/hate relationship between the pulps and 'modern science fiction' within ourselves," meaning within writers of speculative fiction who evolved as readers and then as writers at least partially within that pulp tradition, meaning *most* SF writers before the 1960s, and more than not even now. For the best of such writers, that love/hate relationship, like most love/hate relationships, has its inevitable tragic element.

Budrys himself, as a critic who has occasionally defended the pulp tradition and as a writer whose work entirely transcends its limitations, knows whereof he speaks, since he, like many of the better SF writers whose careers came to flower in the 1950s, does indeed incorporate that dichotomy within himself.

For some of the more commercially street-smart writers of serious intent of that period, the dichotomy became a dialectic, a dialectic that produced a synthesis in the form of what Budrys may mean by "modern science fiction."

In the 1950s there arose a science fiction that, while not quite aspiring to absolute *literary* standards, indeed often enough disparaging them in favor of so-called "transparent prose," nevertheless aspired to absolute *intellectual* standards, and thereby transcended some, if not all, of the limitations of the Pulp Tradition.

An exemplary figure in this evolution as a writer and one of its creators as an editor who is still writing much the same sort of science fiction today is Frederik Pohl.

Pohl began publishing in the pulps of the day as a teenage SF fan back in the late 1930s and hit flank speed in the 1940s, cranking it out under a variety of pseudonyms, collaborating with many writers, in the pulp manner, while editing SF pulps himself.

It must be remembered that prior to the advent of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and *Galaxy* at the cusp of the 1950s, pulp SF magazines were all that there were, with the possible exception of *Astounding,* where the editor, John W. Campbell, Jr., did indeed pursue intellectual passions, mostly of a scientific and pseudoscientific nature, but also a kind of political human manifest destiny.

But in those days, if you weren't a "Campbell writer," meaning if you couldn't or wouldn't work within his intellectual framework, you pretty much were limited to writing action adventure for the pulps.

In the 1950s, this changed. The magazines might still be printed on pulp paper with schlocko covers, but now there were three magazines edited by men with trans-commercial agendas: Campbell, whose hobbyhorse was visionary science; Anthony Boucher at *Fantasy & Science Fiction,* who aspired to the publication of fiction of literary quality; and H.L. Gold, who sought after sociological, psychologically, politically engaged SF.

Now there was an intellectual ferment within the SF genre. Crosscurrents. Feuds. Passions. Full-length SF novels began to appear in paperback.

Now there was such a thing as "serious science fiction" that was neither "commercial pulp" nor "literature," that aspired to transcend the former without really becoming the latter.

The long career and impressive oeuvre of Frederik Pohl is an ideal example of this sort of science fiction, which has not really entirely lost its centrality to the wider realm of speculative fiction today.

Pohl's latest novel, *O Pioneer!,*

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may not be among his best works, like *Mars Plus, Chernobyl, Jem, Gateway,* or *The Space Merchants,* his famous collaboration with C.M. Kornbluth, but it is fairly typical Pohl, which, in turn, is exemplary of this sort of "serious science fiction."

The protagonist, Evesham Giyt (and I suspect Pohl, the international cosmopolitan, does get the British sense of his last name), a seedy disreputable hacker in a thoroughly unpleasant future Earth, and his ex-hooker wife flee this society and their problems therein to the colonial planet Tupelo, where humans and several alien species share a somewhat uneasy co-dominum.

Here Giyt becomes mayor almost by accident, and he and his wife stepwise evolve into responsible mature human beings under the pressure of circumstance, via their relationships with various aliens, and in the course of the major plotline, which involve attempts to take over the planet entire by one of the factions.

The prose, as in most, if not all of Pohl's work, is "transparent," that is, an efficient means of transmitting the events of the story to the reader and not its own raison d'être. The aliens, while physically and biologically outré, are not really all that psychologically alien, and the plot structure is fairly standard and its outcome predictable rather early on . . . *if* you are familiar with the work of Frederik Pohl.

And that is the kicker.

That is what raises this novel and much of Pohl's other work above the Pulp Tradition tropes that simple summaries such as the above would seem to imply.

Because Frederik Pohl, at least from the 1950s onward, has been a politically engaged as well as scientifically engaged writer. Which is to say the future of science and technology, its influence on society, and sociopolitics in general, have been the intellectual passions informing his science fiction.

For a science fiction writer to be scientifically engaged is not unusual, and many are also politically engaged, mostly in a rather right of center libertarian manner more concerned with the future of space exploration than anything else.

But Pohl has always viewed human politics with a sophisticated and jaundiced eye, concerned with the future of man in space maybe, but at least as concerned with questions of political morality and social and economic justice, and not from a right of center viewpoint at all.

Much of his best work has been political, economic, and social satire, and while *O Pioneer!* is not quite that, it is something close, something perhaps peculiar to "serious science fiction."

Pohl's dystopian future Earth does not have the sensual and psychological depth of verisimilitude of a Ballard or a Gibson or a Sterling, his colonial planet is more of the same, and his aliens do not strike the reader as deeply alien.

O Pioneer! is the sort of science fiction that is pretty impenetrable to people who haven't read much science fiction. Like pulp SF, it more or less rings the changes on fairly standard SF tropes—the cyberwhiz, the corporate dystopian Earth, the colonial planet, the biologically bizarre aliens, and so forth.

But unlike pulp SF, "serious science fiction" like this manipulates these tropes to serious intellectual intent, in Pohl's case herein political, and, without giving too much away, to make political points not only different from the usual in this sort of story, but a cunning deconstruction of it in a way.

The tropes and givens of this kind of science fiction, pulp clichés though many of them may be, become a kind

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of language and grammar with which serious science fiction writers may address serious readers of science fiction on matters of serious intellectual intent, even if they do alienate the reader unfamiliar with the symbol system.

And while this may limit the audience to the cognoscenti, there is no reason why it cannot produce intellectually satisfying work—satisfying to those who can read it, that is. Just as there is no reason why great literature cannot be written in languages like Estonian or Basque or Romansch that tend to limit reader demographics severely too.

In the skilled hands of a writer like Frederik Pohl, that is.

But it is all too easy for science fiction writers, even good ones, to get lazy, to get lost in the manipulation of these tropes, to the point where the work descends into babblement even for experienced readers of the stuff.

Case in point, *White Light* by William Barton and Michael Capobianco.

Barton and Capobianco have collaborated on three previous novels, *Iris*, *Fellow Traveler*, and *Alpha Centauri*, all of them successful to one degree or another, and *Iris* in particular much more than that, so *White Light* was a novel I began with eager expectations.

The set-up is that space pilot Wolf O'Malley, his housekeeper-cum-paramour Honoria Suarez, her teenage daughter Corazon, O'Malley's ex-lover space ship flight engineer Thalia Jansky, her teenage son Stuart, and Jansky's current husband Mark Porringer, through reasonable twists and turns not involving *too* much coincidence, become the crew-by-circumstance of a terminal Earth's first faster-than-light starship.

Honoria was rescued by O'Malley and turned into his sexual serf. O'Malley then re-united her with her daughter. Jansky and O'Malley discover they still have the hots for each other, Stuart has the hots for Corazon, and Mark Porringer is odd man out.

A sexual witch's brew of characters isolated together and off into the void.

So far, so good.

The Earth they are leaving is well-described and realistic on many levels, the characters have more depth and definition than usual in this sort of thing, particularly when it comes to their sexuality, and the approaches to and discoveries of the first and even second or third levels of the advanced and mysterious galactic civilization they begin to encounter are rendered with admirable verisimilitude and dramatic tension.

A pretty standard SF set-up, but promising much more than gosh-wow space adventure.

Unfortunately, *White Light* delivers much less than even that.

White Light is dedicated in part to Frank Tipler, and his concept of the Omega Point, alluded to throughout, is the book's structural core, thematic raison d'être, and climactic denouement.

You don't know what I'm talking about?

Welcome to the club.

Barton and Capobianco never really explain Tipler's concept in *White Light*. They make the horrendous mistake of assuming that it is part of the canon of SF tropes understood by their readership, and that, I believe, is why the novel completely falls apart.

I think I am fairly typical of the experienced SF reader in this matter, perhaps, dare I say, a bit more knowledgeable than most. I haven't read Tipler's work directly, but I do know that Frank Tipler is a cosmological astronomer and a believing Christian who contends that the physics of the universe implies the

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necessity of both God and the eventual resurrection of all sentient beings who have ever lived at "the end of time," i.e., the so-called Omega Point.

Tipler's notion, as best I understand it, is that when the universe ceases to expand and then contracts into the universal black hole, the ultimate singularity, time itself, all that ever was, collapses onto the event horizon thereof, that this creates a kind of universal deity, and that, since time on the event horizon of a black hole does not "move" in a forward linear manner, this re-creation of all previous temporal existence is "eternal," an eternal universal afterlife, a kind of heaven.

And if *that* gives you a headache to contemplate, ahem, you can try my own story, "The Tale of the (Man) Who (Met) (God)" in *Light Years and Dark,* edited by Michael Bishop and published by Berkley way back in 1984 before the concept was even a gleam in Tipler's eye, and which I immodestly believe is a far more coherent astrophysical explication of much the same concept than anything in *White Light.*

The point being that if *I* find the conceptual core of *White Light* babblement after having written a story about something like it myself, I seriously doubt that many readers will make much more sense of it from a textual reading of Barton and Capobianco's novel.

Okay, my story runs about 2,000 words, *White Light* is 343 pages long, so surely something like it, or at least my two-paragraph potted version of Tipler, could have easily been inserted somewhere in the novel, and why the editor didn't make the writers do it is beyond me.

But the problem here is much worse than the technical flaw of the absence of a clear explanation of Tipler's concept. Worse even than the writers' assumption that it really isn't necessary. Because this specific flaw is symptomatic of a generality that not only destroys the coherence of *White Light,* but of much work like it.

Tipler's Omega Point notion, like the fictional notion of nanotechnology only more so, implies, at least in fictional terms, that pretty much anything the writer cares to imagine or pack-rat from somewhere can legitimately exist within the fictional universe in which it is axiomatic.

It is a fictional device for intellectually legitimizing fantasy as science fiction. In disciplined hands, this does not have to be a bad thing, but in *White Light* Barton and Capobianco use it in an attempt to justify a universe of multiple levels of reality almost all of which are constructed not merely of the hoary tropes and common imagery of pulp SF, but in some cases recognizably copped from existing works, since the thesis is that anything anyone ever imagined will be resurrected at the Omega Point, in the universal heaven.

It is thus somehow appropriate that the version in which their protagonists find themselves at the end is a sort of infinite chain hotel, replete with room-service and well-trained and obsequious staff.

Thus, quite unintentionally, I believe, *White Light* becomes a ghastly parody, not of Frank Tipler's Omega Point, but of the ultimate extreme to which this sort of SF's self-referential disconnection from anything outside its own image system can be carried, the Omega Point of the Pulp Tradition beyond whose event horizon lies only the void.

On the other hand, while no one has worked the tropes of pulp SF and pulp fiction in general more than Philip José Farmer, and while *Nothing Burns in Hell* is full of them in a sense, this novel is by no means standard pulp adventure, is not SF, is something of a masterpiece, and achieves a literary miracle.

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Farmer has written endless pastiches of pulp fiction, of Tarzan, of Doc Savage, of Tarzan versus Doc Savage, and much more, and once during a somewhat woozy conversation looked me straight in the eye and said, "You know, this is going to sound strange, but on some level I do believe that Tarzan is real."

But Farmer is a *student* of the pulps, a loving student, and Farmer, though not all of his huge oeuvre demonstrates it, is a writer of vast erudition, a good-hearted but sardonic sense of humor, and a surrealist when the spirit moves him.

And when the spirit moves him, Farmer can be a literary stylist with an ear so fine that he can produce things like the short story "The Jungle Rot Kid on the Nod," in which he rewrites Edgar Rice Burroughs in the literary voice of William Burroughs and does it quite perfectly.

Nothing Burns in Hell is a sort of hard-boiled detective novel, narrated in first person by the dick in question, Tom Corbie, like Farmer a devotee of pulp literature, high literature, Mark Twain, SF, and all sorts of strange arcana, allowing Farmer to speak through him pretty much with the full range of his own voice, as he thuds and blunders humorously, violently, libidinously, intellectually sophisticatedly, through a fairly conventional murder mystery plot that serves as Philip José Farmer's armature for a magical mystery tour through Corbie's and his own hometown, Peoria, Illinois.

Yes, *Peoria.*

As in "But will it in play in Peoria?"

Peoria, the archetypal nowhere Middle American town.

I *told* you Farmer has pulled off a literary miracle in this book, didn't I? It's not stretching it all that far to say that Farmer has done for Peoria what James Joyce did for Dublin and then some, and with many more laughs along the way in the bargain.

Corbie and Corbie's father are deep into the history of Peoria, real and legendary, meaning of course so is Philip José Farmer. *Nothing Burns in Hell* is basically a comic novel and wonderfully successful on that level, but that doesn't prevent it from conveying a deep sense of place and history, of the geography of the Peoria area and its relationship to the lives of its peculiar people, of its apparently bizarre, complex, and exotic history.

How much of all this is true and how much is Farmer?

In a literary sense, it doesn't matter, for Philip José Farmer has done the seemingly impossible, he has written a kind of American Magic Realist detective novel about a city previously considered a synonym for the deep and generic sticks. He has drenched Peoria in mythic resonance. He has made it a magic place.

In some absolute sense—perhaps the same sense in which Farmer contended that Tarzan is real—Philip José Farmer's Peoria, not the place on the road map, is the real thing, now and forever.

Why, you may ask, am I discussing a novel which is not SF, not even really fantasy, in this context?

For two reasons, one happy, one perhaps not.

Nothing Burns in Hell demonstrates the enormous difference between writers who allow themselves to unwittingly become unselfconsciously trapped in the unexamined tropes and image systems of the Pulp Tradition to the point where they don't really perceive that they are gibbering at most of their readers as Barton and Capobianco have in *White Light*, and a scholar of the Pulp Tradition like Farmer who uses it not as shorthand or a given but as a mine of useful material with which to enrich a work which, while celebrating it, rises far far above it.

That's the good news.

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A magician like Philip José Farmer can spin pulp straw into literary gold.

The bad news is that even a writer of Farmer's sophistication and literary prowess can be trapped by the Pulp Tradition.

For Philip José Farmer in his long and prolific career—constrained by the economic realities of the marketplace, literarily seduced perhaps by his own affection for the pulps—has himself turned out great reams of stuff which does not transcend the Pulp Tradition but which remains firmly inside its limits.

Leading one to wonder what might have been.

What might the Farmer of *Nothing Burns in Hell* have produced down through the years if his enormous creative powers had been given this free reign every time out?

Maybe that's too much for readers to ask.

Maybe that's too much for Farmer to have asked.

Perhaps he hasn't. Certainly he hasn't let his decades of toil in the pulp vineyard prevent him from producing the occasional masterpiece nor crush his spirit, as witness the exuberance and brio of *Nothing Burns in Hell.*

In the real world that makes Philip José Farmer a literary hero in my book. A half a century or so and he's still got the Holy Fire.

But *not* because of the Pulp Tradition.

In spite of it. O

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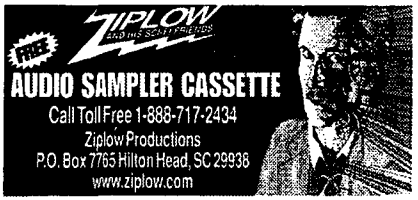

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SF Conventional Calendar

by Erwin S. Strauss

The 2001 WorldCon will be held in Philadelphia. Join now, before rates rise. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

JANUARY 1999

29–31—**Warp.** For info, write: **Accommodations Office, University College, Cork, Ireland.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999 (in the US)** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(E-mail) donaljmc@hotmail.com.** Con will be held in: Cork, Ireland (if city omitted, same as in address) at the University College. Guests will include: none announced. Gaming emphasis.

30—**Creation. (818) 409-0960.** Convention Center, Sacramento CA. Commercial event focusing on Hercules and Xena.

FEBRUARY 1998

5–7—**XI-Lophone.** Copthorne Slough-Windsor Hotel, Berkshire UK. Dave Clement, Lawrence Dean. SF folksinging.

12–14—**Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311.** Sheraton Tara. C. Willis, S. Youll, T. Harvia, Thayer.

12–14—**ConDor, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92175. (E-mail) dkeais@home.com.** Town & Country Hotel, San Diego CA.

12–14—**RadCon, 2527 W. Kennewick Ave. #162, Kennewick WA 99336. (509) 943-0713.** Doubletree, Pasco WA. Mike Moscoe.

12–14—**KatsuCon, Box 8151, Reston VA 20195. (703) 904-7256.** Hyatt Regency, Crystal City (Arlington) VA. Anime.

12–14—**Starfleet Ball, 5 Elms, Holtwood Dorset BH21 7DT, UK. (07000) 4-STARFLEET.** Bournemouth UK. Star Trek, etc.

12–15—**CostumeCon, Box 34739, Philadelphia PA 19101. CCXVII@aol.com.** Hilton, Cherry Hill NJ. Costumers' annual meet.

12–15—**Gallifrey, Box 3021, N. Hollywood CA 91609. (818) 752-3756.** Best Western Airtel, Van Nuys CA. Dr. Who.

12–15—**DunDraCon, 1145 Talbot Ave., Albany CA 94706.** Marriott, San Ramon, CA. Long-running fantasy gaming meet.

13–14—**Stellar Travels, 7410 W. 119th #113, Shawnee Mission KS 66213. (800) 936-7256.** Ramada KCI, Kansas City MO.

19–21—**JohnCon, OSA, 122 Merryman Hall, JHU, 3400 N. Charles St., Baltimore MD 21218.** Johns Hopkins U. Gaming/SF.

19–21—**VisionCon, Box 1415, Springfield MO 65801. (417) 886-7219.** Clarion. Gorham, Caps, J. Murray, Myhr, Cornett.

19–21—**Lightspeed, 16 Bramwell, Eastwood, Rotherham S. Yorks. S65 1RZ, UK. (01709) 367-321.** Aldred, Ashton. Media.

26–28—**SheVaCon, Box 416, Verona VA 24482. (540) 886-2154.** Ingleside Resort, Staunton VA. Steve White, R. W. Smith.

26–28—**MarsCon, Box 11414, Minneapolis MN 55111. marscon99@hotmail.com.** Radisson South, Bloomington MN.

26–28—**Escapade, Box 30908, Santa Barbara CA 93130.** Holiday Inn, Goleta CA. Adult fanzines.

26–28—**Fantasm, 67 Gail Dr., Athens GA 30606. (E-mail) info@fantasm.org.** Quality Hotel, Spartanburg SC.

26–28—**Redemption, 28 Diprose Rd., Corfe Mullen, Wimborne BH21 3QY, UK. (01202) 693-039.** Ashford Int'l. Blake's 7/B5.

26–28—**Chronicles, 69 Merlin Crescent, Edgware Middlesex HA8 6JB, UK.** Grand Hotel, Birmingham UK. Highlander.

26–28—**Fal Tor Pan, 26 A Napier Ave., Southend-on-Sea SS1 1LZ, UK. ftpcon@aol.com.** Britannia, Birmingham UK. Media.

AUGUST 1999

26–29—**Conucopia, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409.** Anaheim CA. Pournelle. The North American SF Con (NASFiC). $85.

SEPTEMBER 1999

2–6—**AussieCon 3, Box 688, Prospect Heights IL 60070.** Melbourne, Australia. Gregory Benford. The WorldCon. US $155.

AUGUST 2000

31–Sep. 4—**ChiCon 2000, Box 642057, Chicago IL 60664.** Bova, Eggleton, Baen, Turtledove, Passovoy. WorldCon. $140.

AUGUST 2001

30–Sep. 3—**Millennium PhilCon, 402 Huntingdon Pike #2001, Rockledge PA 19046.** Downtown Phila. PA. WorldCon. $125.

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NEXT ISSUE

APRIL LEAD STORY

Eleanor Arnason, author of such popular novels as *A Woman of the Iron People*, which won the James Tiptree Jr. Memorial Award, and *Ring of Swords*, and who last appeared here with the evocative Arthurian fantasy "The Dog's Story," returns to these pages next month with our April lead story, a fast-paced and exciting new science fiction novelette called "Stellar Harvest." This time, she takes us to a wild and untamed frontier planet in company with a woman who's scouting locations for a cheesy but popular series of interstellar Space Opera adventure movies—but who finds herself up to her neck in more real adventure, dirty and gritty and dangerous, than she'd ever bargained for when her path crosses with that of a hunted fugitive, and she find herself also on the run, forced to make painful choices that have life-or-death consequences of the kind that characters in lurid movie thrillers don't have to deal with . . . This one is great fun, so don't miss it!

TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Hugo Award-winner **Kristine Kathryn Rusch** returns with a poignant study of the kind of ties that can sometimes even be stronger than the instinct to survive, even when they're between human and alien, in the moving "Bonding"; **Tony Daniel**, in a story set in the same universe as his popular novella "Grist," takes us to a bizarre high-tech far future to uncover the secret behind a strange, enigmatic, and unnatural disaster, as he pries open a "Mystery Box"; **Jeff Hecht**, making his *Asimov's* debut, invites us along with three determined scientists who make some discoveries wilder than anything they could have imagined while investigating "The Rumor of the Ruined City"; the madcap **Eliot Fintushel** gives us ringside seats for a wild and wooly metaphysical three-ring circus of the sort he's made a specialty of producing, this one involving invading aliens, sex, gods, cross-dressing, and spaghetti sauce, as we witness the headlong and funny confrontation of "Iz and the Blue God"; and **Michael Armstrong** returns to these pages after a long absence with the intense and powerful story of spacemen embroiled in a seemingly endless interstellar conflict who are forced to make some very hard choices when they're suddenly "Recalled to Home."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column talks about the things that can be "Lost In Translation"; and **Paul Di Fillipo** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features. Look for our April 1999 issue on sale on your newsstand on March 2, 1999, or subscribe today (you can now also subscribe electronically, online, at our new Asimov's Internet website, at **http://www.asimovs.com**), and be sure that you miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you in 1999! And, with the holidays coming up, keep in mind that a subscription to *Asimov's* makes a great Christmas gift, too!

COMING SOON

Great new stories by **Robert Reed**, **William Barton**, **Kage Baker**, **Walter Jon Williams**, **David Marusek**, **Brian Stableford**, **Eliot Fintushel**, **Gregory Feeley**, **Jane Yolen**, **Tom Purdom**, **Andy Duncan**, and many others.

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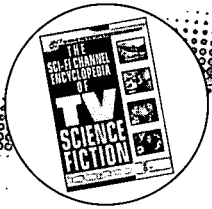

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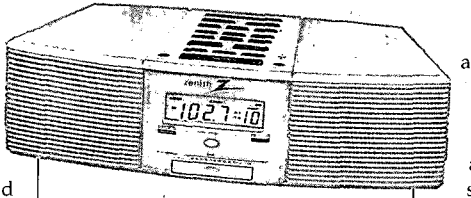

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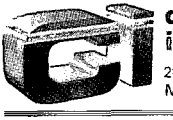

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